RITUALS IN SLAVIC PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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RITUALS IN SLAVIC PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION

FESTIVALS, BANQUETING, AND DIVINATION

by
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ARC HUMANITIES PRESS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN (HB): 9781641892063
eISBN (PDF): 9781802701173

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Printed and bound in the UK (by CPI Group [UK] Ltd), USA (by Bookmasters), and elsewhere using print-on-demand technology.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS a natural continuation of previous works arising from a number of research projects in which one of the co-authors was principal investigator and the other a member of the research team.[1] The goal of the projects was to identify and compile all available historical sources on Slavic pre-Christian religion, and to determine whether it was possible to reconstruct the religion from these sources. Slavic pre-Christian religion is at a disadvantage with respect to other religions of ancient Indo-European peoples: Slavs did not leave any direct written evidence of their religion. Like the other Indo-European peoples, their culture was originally non-literate, but in their case they did not adopt writing until they adopted Christianity. That is why the evidence which has reached us on their religion is all indirect, late and necessarily with an ideological bias, as it was produced within the framework of monotheistic religions, whether by Christian or Muslim authors.

This led us to reflect on whether it was possible to reconstruct this religion based on these materials. Of great use in this endeavour has been the compilation of historical sources on Slavic pre-Christian religion published recently by one of the authors of this monograph.[2] It constitutes the most complete compilation of historical sources so far. By comparing the evidence from these sources, it is possible to identify equivalent phenomena in the three zones of settlement of the Slavic peoples: the East, West and South Slavs. The evidence of these phenomena appearing in different authors from different periods argues in their favour. The problem arises when there is no coincidence or equivalence in the sources. Our observation has detected proportionally more parallelisms in the case of rites than myths.

The study of Slavic mythology faces the same methodological problems as any other aspect of Slavic pre-Christian religion.[3] Basically, as there is no written record until Christianization, the Slavic peoples did not leave us directly any mythical stories. The evidence from historical sources is limited to only a few mentions of the names of gods, but the functions of each are barely explained. They have to be deduced through a comparison, first, of the historical references to gods among the different Slavic peoples, as well as between the gods of the latter and those of other peoples of the Indo-European

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1 Research projects: *Fuentes de la religión eslava precristiana* (BFF2003–04440, completed in 2007) and *La reconstrucción de la religión eslava precristiana. Los testimonios textuales y comparativos* (FFI2010–16220, completed in 2013). Moreover, this book has been published Open Access with the generous funding of the Institute for the Sciences of Religions of the Complutense University of Madrid (IUCCRR).

2 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*.

3 See Chapter 1.

family of languages and cultures. Second, the linguistic data, mainly the etymology of the theonyms and religious terms, have to be analyzed, as do the data from archaeology and folklore, though our analysis will be mainly philological. At times the differences in the names of the gods in the various geographical areas settled by the Slavs can also be due to religious taboo, which resulted in the faithful calling their gods by epithets, in order to avoid using their actual names. In short, we can say that the reconstruction of a common mythology for the whole Slavic area is much more difficult than that of other aspects of Slavic pre-Christian religion and rites.

As regards the rites, according to Rappaport,[4] "no society is devoid of what a reasonable observer would recognise as ritual," considering ritual "to be the social act basic to humanity." This social dimension of the ritual was developed from the work of Émile Durkheim[5] in which religion is analyzed as a set of beliefs and rituals, these being a dynamic and necessary part of the integration and consolidation of society. However, Durkheim's dichotomy is difficult to apply in the case of ancient Indo-European religions, such as the Slavic one, where we know nothing or almost nothing about the beliefs, but at least we can know something about the rites. In fact, according to Dowden,[6] in this type of religion the concept of "belief" is irrelevant, compared to ritual practice, which is what truly defines it and, ultimately, what creates patterns of regularity[7] that allow regulating social interactions. It is perhaps this central aspect of rites in the social life of a community which makes them more recurrent and identifiable in the historical sources, and which is the reason why most evidence of them has come down to us, at times disguised behind popular traditions of folklore in the Christian period, sometimes even into today's world.

Organizing a complete taxonomy of rituals is somewhat complicated.[8] In this book, we have worked on some of those that seem most worthy of study within the field of pre-Christian Slavic religion or on which we have better materials. The selected rituals are grouped according to their purpose or function: fertility, elements of daily life, military activity and rituals related to death.

As we will see in this monograph, of particular importance for the Slavs are fertility rites and the cult of the dead, both of which are closely related to each other. Fertility and funerary rituals thus open and close the chapters of this book, Chapters 2 and 5, as a kind of alpha and omega of the rites of Slavic pre-Christian religion. Between these two, the rest of the chapters are dedicated to the rites of everyday life (Chapter 3) and military rites (Chapter 4). We finally decided not to dedicate an exclusive chapter to divining rites, as they are widely represented in the rest of the chapters, particularly in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 4 in fact provides a profuse description of divining as practiced

4 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 31.

5 Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*.

6 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 167.

7 Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 53.

8 See a good example in Alexander "Ceremony," 179–83.

by the ancient Slavs before combat, to discover the outcome of battles. Also, in Chapter 2, which is dedicated to the fertility rituals, there is a description of various divining rites dedicated to predicting the result of annual harvests. In Chapter 3, which is dedicated to the rituals of everyday life, we have included the rites of oaths and promises, divining rites related to throwing dice or interpreting omens, rites related to trade and travel, and those associated with curing illness. We have also included as a preliminary chapter an analysis of the methodological problems involved in reconstructing the Slavic pre-Christian religion, which we set out below.

Chapter 1

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN RECONSTRUCTING PRE-CHRISTIAN SLAVIC RELIGION

ONE OF THE main methodological problems for the study of Slavic pre-Christian religion resides in the indirect nature of the sources. As in the case of the rest of the Indo-European peoples, Slavic culture was not originally literate. Because they began to use writing later than other Indo-European peoples, starting in the ninth century and linked to Christianization, we have no first-hand records of sacred texts or myths.

This involves a second methodological problem: religious manipulation of the sources. The texts in which Slavic paganism is described are mostly the work of Christian or Muslim authors; in other words, monotheists who treat the local religion with a significant anti-pagan bias, and because of this we have to apply extreme caution to all the sources. However, if this caution is taken too far, we may be left with no information. This happened in the 1930s, mainly in the German school, which tended to consider alien to Slavic culture all elements it had in common with other Indo-European cultures.

Another problem we find is the great dispersion over space and time and linguistically, of both the Slavic languages and peoples, as well as of those informing us of their pre-Christian religion. The texts in which we find some kind of reference to Slavic pre-Christian religion range from the fifth century to the second half of the sixteenth century, a period covering 11 centuries. With respect to geographic diversity of the Slavic peoples, it has its origin in a historical event known as the "Great Slavic Expansion," a massive migratory movement which began at the end of the fifth century and the start of the sixth. It was at this point that the Slavs entered history, when they clashed with the great European states of the time: first, the Germanic kingdom of the Francs and its successor the Carolingian Empire, as well as the Byzantine Empire, which is our main source of information on them.

With their westward expansion, the number of sources which are contemporary with living pagan practices would increase. The Slavs based on the shores of the Baltic created a number of independent states, the last being the independent pagan state on the island of Rügen, which was conquered and Christianized by the Danes in 1168. There are a significant number of Latin chroniclers of Germanic origin, taking us up to the start of the thirteenth century, and giving us their vision of a paganism that was still alive.

The expansion of the Slavs towards the east would generate a very unusual form of state, based on a model of trading posts created by the Scandinavians to control the routes along the major rivers linking the Baltic to the Black Sea and the trade between northern Europe and Byzantium. A series of texts in Arabic records religious practices in this area. They are very interesting, although they raise serious problems of attribution, given that at times it is not clear to what extent the Arabic travellers are talking about

the Scandinavians settled on the banks of the Volga or the Slavic inhabitants of the same zone. In any event, they are texts referring to a geographical area which would see the creation of the first Eastern Slavic state, Kievan Rus', and they are contemporary to the events described (tenth century). Following the conversion to Christianity in 988, it is Christian authors who write the history of the principate of Kiev and to whom we owe our information on the pre-Christian period of this state.

With respect to the sources on the Slavic pre-Christian religion, J. A. Álvarez-Pedrosa[1] has shown in his recently published monograph that they can be of various types, including the following three: historical, archaeological and those from folklore.

If we categorize the historical sources from greatest to least value, we should first mention the authors contemporary to a "living" paganism. Within this group we can distinguish, first, the authors with an "anthropological curiosity" or strategic interest; and second, the Christian missionaries who had to have a good knowledge of the peoples they were to evangelize. Second, with less value, are the texts that are not contemporary with the events they narrate, and third, are those condemning the survival of pagan practices in a Christianized society.

The archaeological sources are the only ones that provide direct proof, but they are difficult to interpret without textual evidence and without historical context. The sources from folklore are complementary and very valuable with respect to the Slavs. However, they do involve the risk of interpreting folk practices of a universal character as Slavic and considering as ancient the ideological interferences of the folklorists of the nineteenth century.

Finally, linguistic data are supplementary, but insufficient in themselves, and at times disputed. They need to be compared with other sources.

Taking everything into account, the methodological problems mentioned make it necessary to reconstruct Slavic pre-Christian religion by a comparative method, applying the comparison at all levels: comparison of all types of sources (history, archaeology and folklore), as well as the written testimonies on all the Slavic peoples among themselves, and these compared with other Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures: Scandinavians, Finno-Ugric, Baltic, Germanic and Iranian.

1 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 1–3.

Chapter 2

FERTILITY RITES

Fertility Rites and Calendrical Rituals

We agree with Rappaport[1] that a characteristic inherent in the ritual is the "performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers," and is "the social act basic to humanity."[2] According to him, "rituals are among the most precisely recurrent of social events."[3] This is particularly evident in the fertility rites that organize time socially, with their links to the annual seasons and nature's cycle of death and rebirth—the passage from winter to spring and the celebration of the goods from the autumn harvest.

Medieval texts that refer to the period when paganism was still a living religion give us information on the symbolic offerings related to seasonal harvests, in a higher degree of socialization and codification. Christianization suppressed those rituals performed in temples with clearly heathen sacrifices. However, other types of less formalized rituals that existed before the Christian times still remain, and they endeavour to express the joy of natural renewal in springtime. These are rituals with dances, chants, music and sometimes some kind of disguise or mask that represented the dead forefathers.

Fertility Rites Prior to Christianization

The Description of a Harvest Ritual in the Sanctuary of Arkona

One of the most interesting texts referring to a fertility ritual among the Slavs has been preserved in book XIV, 39 of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*.[4] This book covers a period of 44 years, from 1134 to 1178, and recounts the ascension to the throne of King Valdemar I of Denmark, who, with the active help of his minister, Bishop Absalon, gave back to Denmark the supremacy lost during the preceding years of civil war. Among other deeds, the king conquered the Slavic kingdoms of the Baltic shore, during several victorious expeditions that gave Saxo the chance to describe the Slavic settlements, together with their costumes and beliefs, thereby becoming one of the most important testimonies regarding the north-western Slavs in the Middle Ages.

In 1169, Valdemar began the conquest of the territory of the Rugiani,[5] in a retaliatory strike after the Slavs broke their alliance while he was being attacked by the Norwegians.

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1 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 24.

2 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 31.

3 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 221.

4 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*.

5 Western Slavic people from the island of Rügen, in the Baltic coast of modern Germany.

Valdemar was very successful, and he decided to move forward, besieging the citadel of Arkona. This gave Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.2.1–8)[6] the opportunity to describe the fortification located on an elevated plane by the sea, "surrounded by the stormy sea" from the east, south and north, and with a rampart on the west side. His account includes a detailed description of the structure of the city and of its famous wooden temple with its double walls, located on the central square of the city.

In addition, Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.3.1–9)[7] elaborates on the rituals devoted to the representation of their supreme deity, the four-headed idol of the god Sventovit.[8] The statue holds in his right hand a horn decorated with metal pieces, which the priest—*sacrorum eius peritus* (experienced in his annual sacred rites)—filled with "liquor"[9] every year with the aim of foretelling the abundance of the following year. The periodical character of the rite reveals its relationship with other fertility rituals from the agrarian year. The other attributes of the idol show the diverse functions of the god: the bow in his left hand together with the bridles and the saddle of his sacred horse. This would be to point out the transfunctional character of the divinity: the horn would stand for fertility and plenty, and the weapons, the bow and the sword, would refer to military powers.[10]

According to Saxo (14.39.4.1–2),[11] the most significant ceremony related to the god Sventovit was celebrated in autumn, after the harvest had been brought in and accounted for. Another passage, which will be discussed later, provides a clue regarding when the ritual was held, at the end of November. Worship of this god was public and solemn, and observed nationally, for the island's entire population participated in it. The ceremony was conducted by the god's priest. This person is described as "showing the strict observance of the length of hair and beard according to old traditions of the ancestral community," unlike the common men, who used to shave their beards and cut their hair imitating the idol's fashion. On the eve of the feast, the priest made the essential preparations for the rite. They consisted of the purification of the *sacellum* or *sancta sanctorum* where the idol was kept, a restricted area where only the priest could enter and where strict ritual purity was observed: the priest had to clean the *sacellum* with a broom, but during that ritual task he was not permitted to breathe inside the shrine. He had to hold his breath and go outside every time he needed air.

The next day, the initial part of the rite started, dealing with taking auguries in order to foretell the harvest of the following year. The priest looked at the idol's horn, which had been filled with liquor the previous year. If the amount remaining was less than

6 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 564.22–565.3.

7 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.3–24.

8 For the English translation, see Sielicki, *Saxo Grammaticus on Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*.

9 *Liquor* in the Latin original, which could be understood as any kind of fermented liquor, most probably mead.

10 Zaroff suggests that the original domain of this deity would be strength and vitality. Zaroff, "The Origins of Sventovit of Rugen," 17.

11 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.24–35.

expected, then the following year's harvest would be poor and he ordered the people to save part of the current harvest for the future. If no change in the level of the liquid inside was observed, they would expect an abundant crop for the year to come, and a more generous use of the present harvest was prescribed.

After this first part of taking the auspices, the central part of the ritual was performed. The priest poured out the old liquor at the feet of the statue, as a libation for the god, and then he refilled the idol's horn twice: the first time, he would drink it and toast for the increasing wealth and victory of his people with the solemn formula *sibi patriae ciuibusque* (for himself, for the homeland and for the people), according to Saxo's literal words (14.39.5.1–10).[12] The second time, after replenishing the horn with liquor, he would put it back in the right hand of the statue. This liquid would be observed the following year.

The symbolism of the horn is clear: it was not just a mere container for drinking but also stood for abundance and wealth in the iconography of ancient cultures. However, even more interesting is the triple formula employed during the rite, with which the priest expressed his wish for wealth and victory for his people. Although it seems obvious that Saxo would not reproduce the exact words, but rather would make an abbreviation in his Latin account, there is further evidence of parallel three-part formulae in other Indo-European religious traditions. These triadic formulae would show the way that the mentalities of those peoples unconsciously represented the concept of totality in a triple form, the same as the tripartite structure of Indo-European societies, as was determined by Benveniste[13] when he analyzed formulae such as those from the Greeks and the Romans. A very clear parallel with the formula employed by the Rugian priest is the invocation described by Cato the Censor[14] to the god Mars to ensure the purification of his fields: *Mars pater te precor quaesoque / uti sies uolens propitious / mihi domo familiaeque nostrae* (Father Mars, I pray and beseech you / that you be favourable (and) propitious / to me, my house and our household).[15] The coincidence between the words *sibi patriae ciuibusque* from the Rugian formula as attested by Saxo Grammaticus and *mihi domo familiaeque nostrae* by the Roman senator and historian is remarkable. Moreover, in the Tables of Iguvium,[16] up to 11 examples of such triadic imprecations in doublets can be found, for instance: *nerf arsmo / ueiro pequo / castruo frif / pihatu* (magistrates (and) formulations, / men (and) cattle, / heads [of grain] (and) fruits / purify) (32–35).[17] Comparative evidence seems to confirm that Saxo would have

12 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.35–566.17.

13 Benveniste, "Symbolisme social dans les cultes gréco-italiques," 5–16.

14 *De agri cultura* 141.1ff.

15 Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 197–213.

16 The most extensive source for the Umbrian language, they consist of a detailed set of liturgical and devotional instructions for a college of priests, the Atiedian Brethren, dating back to the third century BC. See also Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 214–25.

17 Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 215, 221–22.

recovered, in a synthetic way, a very ancient formulaic expression, present also in other Indo-European religions.

The third part of the ceremony as recounted by Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.5.1–10) included a ritualized dialogue between the priest and the people, whose main element was the offering of a round cake, almost as tall as a human, that was made of mead and honey, which were two typical components of fertility rites. From behind the cake the priest asked the people whether they could see him or not from where they were standing. There was always somebody who could see him, so he would say that for the following year he would wish for a cake big enough so that nobody could see him. We do not know if it was a kind of huge cylindrical cake like the Russian *kulich*,[18] or if it was a wheel-shaped cake placed standing on its side during the ritual. If the latter is the case, then the solar symbology would be plausible, and it would remind us of the round Roman pies made of honey and flour offered to the god Summanus on June 20 during the festival of *Summanalia*, as attested by Paulus Festus,[19] the Umbrian *urfeta*,[20] or the *rathacakra* (chariot wheel) from the Brahmanic rite of *Vājapeya*.[21] In any case, Saxo says explicitly that the purpose of the ritual was to increase the future harvest.

Finally, coming back to the account of Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.6.1–3),[22] the Rugian ritual ended with a farewell speech addressed to the community in which the priest, speaking on behalf of the god, asked the people to maintain both the cult and the rite devoted to Sventovit in order to win military victories on land and sea, if the ritual was performed correctly.

The final point of the celebration was a collective ritual banquet, which was usually the case in most fertility rites shared by the whole population, including the sacrifice of cattle that were eaten later during the banquet that, in Saxo's words (14.39.4.1), was celebrated "in the name of religion."[23] This banquet was massive and excessive, for according to Saxo (14.39.6.3), "in this banquet it was considered pious to violate abstinence and observing it was considered a bad habit."[24]

In short, we can infer that the ceremony had the following steps: a preparatory phase with a purifying function, a first part during which the auguries were taken, a central part focused on the triadic oration for the sake of the whole community, and a

18 On ritual sweet bread baked during Easter, see Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 9.

19 Festus 557 L.

20 *Tabulae Iguvinae* IIb, cf. the etymological connected parallel, Lat. *orbita*.

21 Petazzoni, *La onniscienza di Dio*, 240, 252; West concludes that these cakes "used in rituals may also symbolize the sun." West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 214–15, 226.

22 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 17–25.

23 *sollenne epulum religionis nomine celebrabat*: Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 565.27.

24 *In quo epulo sobrietatem uiolare pium estimatum est, seruare nefas habitum*: Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 566.24–25.

third part with the ritualized dialogue between the priest and the people, including the offering of the ritual cake. To conclude, there was the sacrifice of cattle and the collective banquet, with the breaking of the rules of austerity. This particular and rigid structure would support the reliability of Saxo's report.

Structure of the fertility ritual of Arkona as described by Saxo Grammaticus[25]	
Parts of the ritual	Contents of the ritual
Preparatory ritual	Purification
First part	Taking of auguries
Central part	Triadic invocation
Third part	Ritualized dialog
Conclusion	Collective banquet

This very same structure has been described by Bernard Sergent[26] regarding the festival of *Huakinthia*, celebrated once a year in Sparta in honour of the Greek god Apollo of Amyklai. Moreover, Sergent identified other similarities between both gods Apollo of Amyklai and Sventovit of Arkona: the relevance of the number four in the shape of their bodies and the participation of horses in their respective festivals.[27] This could be pointing out the historicity and the antiquity of the Slavic cult of Sventovit of Arkona.

Another supporting argument in favour of the historical existence of the Rugian ritual would be a recently identified testimony of William of Malmesbury,[28] a twelfth-century English monk and historian, who never travelled outside England but who was very well informed. When describing the reign of the German emperor Henry III (1039–1056) in his work *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (II.189),[29] he speaks about the peoples that Henry III conquered:

> But the Vindelici worship Fortune, and putting her idol in the most eminent situation, they place a horn in her right hand, filled with the beverage, made of honey and water, which by a Greek term we call "hydromel" [...] Wherefore on the last day of November, sitting round in a circle, they all taste it; and if they find the horn full, they applaud with loud clamours: because in the ensuing year, plenty with her brimming horn will fulfil their wishes in everything: but if it be otherwise, they lament.[30]

25 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "Fortune and Fertility Rites among the Pre-Christian Western Slavs," 161.

26 Sergent, "Svantovit et l'Apollon d'Amyklai," 24.

27 Sergent, "Svantovit et l'Apollon d'Amyklai," 19–20, 37–39.

28 Słupecki and Zaroff, "William of Malmesbury," 9–20.

29 Stubbs, *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi*, 230–31.

30 Słupecki and Zaroff, "William of Malmesbury," 10. See the original English translation in Gilles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England*, 208–9.

Although William of Malmesbury attributes this ritual to the Vindelici[31] instead of to the Rugiani, the details that he provides remind us very much of the Rugiani ceremony described by Saxo Grammaticus, and both testimonies are very close in time. The divinity that he mentions is identified with the Roman goddess Fortune, but it could be due to the *interpretatio romana*. However, she is considered a supreme deity, for she is said to occupy "the most eminent situation." Moreover, if we assume that the Vindelici of William of Malmesbury are none other than the Ranove or Rugiani from the island of Rügen, as Roman Zaroff[32] argues, then we could infer the exact date when the ritual devoted to the god Sventovit was celebrated: Saxo Grammaticus says that it took place in autumn, after the harvest, and William of Malmesbury gives a more precise date, the last day of November.

Another ritual more simple related to harvest is attested in Ibn Rustah's *Book of Precious Gems*, a tenth-century history and geography encyclopedia, when speaking about the East Slavs: "When harvest time arrives, they collect the millet grain onto a shovel, raise it towards the sky and say: 'Oh Lord, you are the one who provides for us and we have none left.'"[33]

The Sacred Lake of Glomuzi and the Auguries of Fertility

Luckily, we have another source that is almost contemporary with the former two, which deals with taking auspices concerning the fertility of the earth and peace and war among the West Slavs. To be precise, it speaks of a sacred lake and it can be found in Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (I.2–3),[34] written between 1012 and 1018, the year he died. Thietmar, despite being a Christian bishop, seems very interested in pagan auguries and sacred places, such as the one that according to him was performed around the sacred spring and lake of Glomuzi,[35] where the natives used to go in order to take omens on the outcome of the harvest and the war.[36]

Again in the western Slavic area, another author is Adam of Bremen, with his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (Deeds of Bishops of the Hamburg Church)

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31 The Vindelici were a Celtic tribe that occupied Raetia in Roman times. It is likely that it should be an intentional mistake for Venedi, a western Slavic people, especially if we bear in mind that it is mentioned together with the "Leutici," that is, "Liutici," another western Slavic people.

32 Słupecki and Zaroff, "William of Malmesbury," 11–14.

33 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 456.

34 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 6. It is an extinct lake that was located two kilometres north of Lommatzsch, between the villages of Paltzschen and Dörschnitz, in Saxony (modern Germany).

35 Called Lommatzsch in modern German. This was the province situated between the river Chemnitz and the Elba.

36 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 68–69; cf. Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 69.

(II, 21),[37] written between 1073 and 1076. When speaking about the Slavic peoples who lived between the Elbe and Oder Rivers, he mentions the Retharii, who according to him were "centrally located and the mightiest of all," and who had erected a temple to their god Redigast[38] in the middle of a deep lake, where people used to look for oracular advice, in their capital city of Rethra.[39] We do not know where the city of Rethra was, in spite of Adam of Bremen's indications. Over 30 hypothetical locations have been suggested in the territory between the rivers Elbe and Oder.[40] Traditionally, the sacred lake has been identified by scholars with the Tollensee[41] based on the similarity between the name of the latter and the ethnonym of the Slavic tribe of the Tholenzi who, according to the account of Helmold of Bosau in his *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 21),[42] disputed supremacy with the Retharii within the so-called Lutician union in 1057. Both Slavic tribes were fighting for control of the city where the temple of god Radigast was found, because all of the Slavic peoples came to it to consult the oracle and offer yearly sacrifices.[43]

However, as Dowden[44] remarked, the coincidence is striking that there was a Slavic tribe in the westernmost point of the Lutician dominion, the *Plune*, who were settled in the surroundings of the *lacum Plunensem*,[45] which is the modern Great Plöner See.[46] On one of the islands, named Olsborg, archaeologists have found a fortress corresponding to a Slavic settlement that according to Helmold's *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 25),[47] was linked to the shore by a long bridge. It is also a coincidence that the Saxon historian and priest Helmold came from the city of Bosau, on the south-east banks of the Plöner See,[48] not far from the city of Plön and the island of Olsborg. Moreover, the *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 83)[49] mentions an idol of the god *Podaga*[50] worshipped by the *Plune*.

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37 Waitz, *Adami Gesta Hammaburgensis*, 54.

38 The name of this divinity could also appear as Radigost or Radigast.

39 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 81–82; cf. Tschan, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. Adam of Bremen*, 66.

40 Słupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 57–60; Schmidt, "Retra—Lieps, am Südenende des Tollensees," 33–46; Zaikouski, "How Many Radogoščes Were There," 271–72.

41 Lake close to the city of Neubrandenburg, in the southeast of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, in modern Germany.

42 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 47–48.

43 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 155; Zaikouski, "How Many Radogoščes Were There," 169.

44 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50.

45 *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 57, 63); Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 116, 124.

46 The Great Plön Lake, the largest lake in Schleswig-Holstein, north-east of Hamburg, in modern Germany.

47 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 54.

48 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 2; 34n3.

49 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 163.

50 Its etymology has been linked by Jakobson to the Proto-Slavic stem **dag-* (to burn). Jakobson, "Slavic Gods and Demons," 8.

The description offered by Adam of Bremen, followed a century later by Helmold of Bosau (*Chronica Slavorum* I, 21, 23; 52; 71),[51] differs from the testimony of Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (VI, 23),[52] who mentions the city of Riedegost in the land of the Redarii.[53] Adam of Bremen's Rethra seems to be in the middle of a lake, while according to Thietmar of Merseburg, the city of Riedegost's lake is said to be located at one of the three entries and/or corners of the city. Both have in common the frightening appearance of the lake. So if they are speaking about the same city and lake, it is possible that Thietmar of Merseburg's location could be the oldest and that it was later moved to an island in the centre of the lake after the city was destroyed for the first time due to the events that took place in 1057 during the internecine war within the Lutician union that was mentioned by Helmold of Bosau.[54] Thietmar identifies the name of the deity with the name of the sanctuary. The etymology of the theonym is apparently clear: it is a compound form for "he who becomes happy with guests," although it could be understood also as "he who becomes happy with (the victory over) enemies." Depending on one or the other interpretation, the function attributed to this divinity varies.[55] The first etymology would make it more oracular, and the second would give it a more military character. In support of the former would be the presence of the lake and its possible eschatological nature, bearing in mind Adam of Bremen's quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* that associates the lake with the river Styx, the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead in the Roman tradition, something that was shared by many other Indo-European religions.[56] Actually, there was a lake close to the idol of the god Veles[57] among the East Slavs, according to the *Life of St. Abraham of Rostov*, as we will comment in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, the lake of Rethra was related to a major sanctuary and temple where auguries could also be taken. As Dowden[58] already pointed out, this sacred lake together with the city of Rethra, wherever it was, were religious centres of political legitimacy in their territory and consequently centres of "national" identity for the surrounding Slavic peoples.

The worship of sacred lakes is well known not only in the Slavic realm but also in other Indo-European religions like those of the Celts, Romans, Greeks and Iranians, among others.[59] For instance, in the Celtic domain of the Gauls, there is the testimony by

51 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 47–49, 50–51, 106–8, 140–41.

52 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 302.

53 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 70–73; Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 253.

54 Zaikouski, "How Many Radogoščes Were There," 170.

55 See other etymologies in Słupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 60. Słupecki feels rather inclined to attribute to him a primary function of oracular character.

56 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 724.

57 Sharing both functions as "god of cattle" and "god of the dead" (see Chapter 5, Funerary Banquet).

58 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50.

59 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50–51.

Gregory of Tours, *On the Glory of the Confessors*, on the lake of St Andéol, 30 kilometres north-west of Marvejols.[60] This lake was worshipped by the local population during an annual three-day festival in which all kinds of sacrifices and offerings were thrown into the lake, out of fear of the storm that happened every year on the fourth day following the celebration.[61] We can find here the same reverential fear mentioned by Thietmar of Merseburg regarding the sacred lakes venerated by the West Slavs, and it can be found again among the Celts in the fear that the Gauls felt towards the sacred lake near the city of Toulouse. This was exploited by the corrupt Roman consul Servilius Caepio, who used it to hide the silver and gold that he had stolen in 106 BC from the Roman treasury, according to Strabo's *Geography* (4.1.13).[62] Likewise, the famous lake of Nemi, near Rome, was revered with fear (Ovid *Fasti* III, 263–264), and it is not by chance that the fertility ritual of the *rex Nemorensis*[63] could have originated in this lake. Another renowned example of a sacred lake associated with an oracular divinity is the lake on the island of Delos, the birthplace of the gods Apollo and Artemis in Greek mythology. The sanctuary where the oracles were consulted was located right near the lake. Moreover, in Iranian Zoroastrianism there were many sacred lakes, though none of them was linked directly with fertility rites or oracular deities. However, there is a myth closely associated with fertility, for it was thought that Zoroaster's seed was kept in the lake Hāmun[64] with the aim of impregnating the three virgins expected to give birth to the three *saošyants*, the Iranian eschatological saviours.

A Festival at the Beginning of the Summer at Wolin

In the first section of this chapter, we reviewed a great festival to celebrate the wealth of the whole population of the island of Rügen that took place at the end of autumn, just after the harvest. But we have several testimonies of other agrarian fertility rites celebrated by the north-western Slavs at the beginning of the summer. After the Christianization of the Slavs of northern Europe, such an important period in the natural cycle was associated with the Christian holiday of Pentecost. Although pre-Christian practices were condemned by Polish and Czech bishops, the half-Christianized rural population maintained many of them. We will focus here on a source dealing with this festival dating back to a time when Slavic paganism was still a living religion, as well as a sign of cultural identity for the people. The specific fragment belongs to Ebbo's *Life of Saint Otto, Bishop of Bamberg* (III, 1),[65] one of the three hagiographies devoted to the

60 In Gévaudan (Lozère), modern France.

61 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 50–51.

62 Dowden, *European Paganism*, 21.

63 See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, chap. 1.

64 In Avestic *Kąsaoya-*.

65 Köpke, "Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis," 858–59.

"apostle of Pomerania," who lived between 1060/1061 and 1139. In this passage[66] we can find a very interesting account of the Slavic pre-Christian revival that took place in the Pomeranian cities of Szczecin and Wolin after the previous missionary activity of St. Otto of Bamberg in 1125. According to the text, the population of Wolin used to worship a spear that the author links to Julius Caesar, the legendary founder of the city, due to the resemblance of the Latin name of the city and the Roman ruler's. However, the mention of a pre-Christian festival that was celebrated in Wolin at the beginning of the summer in honour of "a certain idol" is more interesting for us. Though we do not know the identity of the god to whom this festivity was devoted, we have as a hint the time of the year when it took place, together with the fact that it included playing, dancing and feasting, so we can conclude that it may be related to fertility. In spite of the fact that the rest of the passage is inspired by the biblical episode of the worship of the Golden Calf by the Israelites after the descent of Moses from the Mount Sinai with the Tables of the Law (Exodus 32), it does not diminish the historical value of the account, especially if we compare it with the parallel festivals celebrated by South and East Slavs in the same period of the year, as we will see in the next section.

Calendrical Rituals after Christianization

Spring Festivals: *Rusalia*

There was another Slavic pre-Christian festivity that started on the eve of Pentecost and finished one week later on the eve of Trinity Sunday, in what was called the *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia* among the East Slavs. A similar holiday with the same designation *Rusalii* was first attested among the Balkan Slavs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by authors like Theodore Balsamon[67] and Demetrios Chomatenos.[68] Therefore, in Theodore Balsamon's *Scholia* or comments to the *Nomocanon* of Photios, and specifically in his comments to the canon LXII of the Council in Trullo,[69] it is said that the festival called *Rusalia* takes place after Easter.[70]

More detailed information is given by Demetrios Chomatenos in his *Ponemata diaphora* (Miscellaneous works),[71] which contain very diverse writings such as a letter in which Demetrios answers as Archbishop of Ohrid a question (number 120) on the

66 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 121–23; Robinson, *The Life of Otto Apostle of Pomerania 1060–1139 by Ebo and Herbordus*, 108–9.

67 Byzantine canonist and Patriarch of Antioch who lived in the second half of the twelfth century.

68 Archbishop of Ohrid (1216–1236) during the Second Bulgarian Empire.

69 Migne, *Patrologia Graeca,* 137.728–729.

70 Theodore Balsamon is writing in Constantinople, and therefore the expression "the outer lands" refers to the territory outside the Byzantine Empire; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 45–46.

71 Prinzing, *Demetrii Chomateni*, 120.

Rusalia,[72] that according to the text was celebrated in the district of Moliskos[73] in the week after Pentecost. The word *Rusalii* comes from the Latin *rosalia*,[74] the Roman festival of the *dies rosae*,[75] with which was probably identified in order to acquire the higher prestige emanating from Roman culture. The *Rusalii* was an ancient fertility festival celebrated in early June and closely linked with the cult of the dead and the springtime agricultural rites. In different parts of the Balkans until very recent times, the celebration of spring festivals in honour of the dead has been maintained, called *rusalje*.[76] The "games, Bacchic dances and coarse theatrical plays" mentioned by Demetrios Chomatenos remind us of the plays and profane jests performed by the Czechs among the West Slavs, as was recounted by Cosmas of Prague.[77] In the East Slavic texts, other festivities called *rusalia* appear, coinciding with the summer and winter solstices: these are most likely related to a pre-Christian solar worship, as we will analyze later.

The annual practice of the celebration of *Rusalii* among the South Slavs meant that its name lost its pre-Christian connotation and became synonymous with Pentecost since very early. Already in the lectionary *Savvina kniga*, which dates back to the ten to eleventh centuries, the term *rusalii* appears three times, referring to Pentecost (*Savv.* 134r, 135v, 149r).[78]

In addition to the South Slavic references to *Rusalii*, we also have East Slavic texts that mention similar festivals with the same name. The earliest allusion can be found in the oldest East Slavic chronicle that has come down to us, the *Primary Chronicle*,[79] also known as *Povest' Vremennykh Let* (henceforth *PVL*), or *Tale of Bygone Years*, which would have been compiled at the beginning of the twelfth century, based on earlier materials. When it recounts the invasion of Kievan Rus' by nomad peoples in 1068, it explains this event as a divine punishment because of the impiety of the inhabitants of Rus', with the following comments:

> By these and other similar customs the devil deceives us, and he alienated us from God by all manner of craft, through trumpets and clowns, through harps and pagan festivals.[80]

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72 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 46–49.

73 One of the administrative divisions of the Second Bulgarian Empire, in the area of Skopje in modern North Macedonia.

74 Ovid, *Fasti* II, 533–40; Martial, *Epigrams*, 9.93.5.

75 Miklosich, *Die Rusalien*, 1–2.

76 See a detailed account on the rituals performed in the village of Duboko, in the west of Belgrade, in Wenzel, "The Dioscuri in the Balkans," 369–74.

77 See the Other Spring Festivals in the Western Slavic Realm.

78 Shchepkin, *Savvina kniga*.

79 For the reconstruction of the original text, see Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The "Pověst' vremennykh lět": An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*. For the Spanish translation and a study on the Indo-European literary motifs, see García de la Puente, *Perspectivas indoeuropeas en la* Crónica de Néstor.

80 *Rusalii* in the original text, see Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The "Pověst' vremennykh lět": An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, col. 170, 12–13.

> For we behold the playgrounds worn bare by the footsteps of a great multitude, who jostle each other while they make a spectacle of a thing invented by the devil.[81]

Although the *PVL* does not specify when the *Rusalii* took place, it confirms one of the elements that we knew from the testimony of Demetrios Chomatenos: the presence of music and theatrical plays. However, as Sreznevskii[82] pointed out, the discourse on the religious significance of barbarian incursions in 1068 would be derived from the *Zlatostrui*, an anthology of the writings of John Chrysostom prepared by or for Tsar Simeon of Bulgaria (893–927) from a Greek original, and as a consequence, we could infer a South Slavic origin for this passage.

The festive character of the *Rusalii* linked to the celebration of public games also appears in an old East Slavic penitential, the *Commandments to the Sons and Daughters Who Confess*.[83] Some scholars attribute its authorship to the Metropolitan George (c. 1065–1078),[84] dating back from the twelfth century at the latest.[85] In spite of its great antiquity, this work has come down to us only in sixteenth-century copies. The text consists of 165 rules, commandments or penances that have been numbered by editors, for in the original manuscripts they were written with no separations and almost without titles. As happened in Theodore Balsamon's fragment, in rule number 105,[86] the *Rusalii* are associated with another festival: *Koliada*.[87] We know from the same text (rule number 137) that the latter was celebrated on the first of January.[88]

This source does not specify the period when the *Rusalii* were celebrated, but the context of rule number 105 could help us, because the rule that follows (number 106) includes instructions on fasting or not eating meat during Pentecost. Thus, it would coincide with the witnessing of the celebration of *Rusalii* by Demetrios Chomatenos during the week after Pentecost. In addition, rule number 147 contains a condemnation of another practice of making potions and casting spells that is said to be carried out on St. Basil's day, that is, on January 1.[89]

From these allusions, we can infer that during *Koliada*, on January 1, people used to participate in a kind of game where cattle played an important role, preparing potions and saying spells. Additionally, we can find more information on this winter festival in the *Instruction of Bishop Ilya of Novgorod*.[90] This text is related to another relevant source, the *Questions of Cyricus, Sava and Ilya to the Bishop Niphont of Novgorod*, for they share one

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81 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 147.

82 Sreznevskii, *Svedeniya i zametki o maloizvestnykh i neizvestnykh pamyatnikov*, 258.

83 Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 112–32.

84 Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 436–37.

85 Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven*, 247.

86 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 319–20.

87 The name *Koliada* would come from the Latin *calendae*, meaning the first day of every month, and especially the first of January, or St. Basil's day in the Orthodox Church.

88 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 322.

89 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 322–23.

90 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* cols. 349–76.

of its main characters, the priest Ilya, who afterwards was appointed bishop of Novgorod, an office that he would have held between 1165 and 1186.[91] Therefore, his *Instruction* would be consecutive in time to the *Questions*, both of them being penitential works. Both provide very interesting information on the sins and practices condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities in the Kievan Rus' during the second half of the twelfth century, some of which would have been inherited from the Slavic pre-Christian religion. However, these works have come down to us in the form of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century copies. Specifically, the passage from *Instruction*[92] number 26 deals with the festival that took place coinciding with the winter solstice, called *Koliada*, which lasted from Christmas Eve until the Epiphany on January 6, forming a cycle of two weeks known as *Koliadki* or *Sviatki*, which may be translated as "Yuletide." In its central point was the celebration on the eve of St. Basil's day, that is, New Year's Eve. According to the last passage, these holidays included a kind of ritual fight, as well as the game of "knuckle-bones," that is, the throwing of the bones from the ankle of an animal, usually sheep, which since ancient times were employed both in gambling and in divination. Slightly more complicated is interpreting the mention of the "aurochs."[93] The Eurasian "auroch," also known as "urus,"[94] was a primitive species of wild cattle that inhabited Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North Africa, and became extinct in the seventeenth century in Europe. According to Pavlov,[95] it likely refers to a popular custom of pre-Christian origin that would be celebrated coinciding with the Christian festivities of Christmas and *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia*,[96] that is, the week after Pentecost or *Rusalia* that we are analyzing. This custom probably had its origin in worship of the auroch as a totemic animal and symbol of fertility. Following Pavlov,[97] it would consist of the ritual during which young men and women would disguise a young man as an auroch, probably with the real fur of the animal, and they would organize a parade through the village, walking the man-bull tied with a rope while singing chants allusive to the auroch. Therefore, the celebration of *Koliada* would add a component of ritualized disguise to the music, as well as to the dances and games.[98]

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91 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* cols. 21–22.

92 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 330.

93 *Tury* in the original text, see Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* cols. 370–71.

94 *Bos primigenius* or *Bos taurus* in its scientific name.

95 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* cols. 370–71n24.

96 Also known as *Zelenye Sviatki* (Green Yuletide), see Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 9.

97 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* cols. 370–71n24.

98 Rybakov links this festival devoted to the auroch at the beginning of the year with the god Veles-Volos. Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 578–84. Veles-Volos was the "god of cattle" according to the *PVL*: Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 65, 90. And this god would be related to the Christian holiday of Epiphany, in whose dedication St. Abraham of Rostov would have founded a monastery in his native city in the same place where a pagan idol of Veles had stood, if we believe the saint's hagiography (See Chapter 5, Funerary Banquet). According to Rybakov, the horned masks that were worn during the celebrations of New Year's Eve and the Epiphany also were called *tury* (urus). Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 581.

Coming back to the *Rusalii*, there are other references to their festive and musical character, as for instance in the *Sermon of St. Niphont on the Rusalii*. The account of the life and miracles of St. Niphont, a fourth-century bishop from Cyprus, was very popular and widespread throughout the Slavic lands, most probably because of the nature of its contents that fit very well into the medieval ideological context of the orthodox Slavic world: the saint is constantly halfway between heaven and hell with many revealing dreams and eschatological visions. In the different versions of the *Vita*, it is narrated how the saint, born in Paphlagonia (Asia Minor) and commemorated by the Orthodox Church on December 23, abandoned his former life as a sinner and took the robes in Constantinople. He experienced a succession of extraordinary episodes as a consequence of the gift received from God: he was able to see the angels and the demons that act in the earthly world and in human lives, which were invisible to the rest of humankind. Such episodes, as happens frequently in the hagiographical genre, are scattered unchronologically around the narration and can be found in the manuscript tradition separately. In the Slavic tradition, the *Life of St. Niphont* had two main versions (short and long), both of them coming from the same source,[99] a South Slavonic translation (most likely Bulgarian) from a Greek original. The first East Slavonic version would have been copied in Rostov during the thirteenth century.[100] Regarding the short Slavonic version, it would have been composed between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[101] Concerning the episode on the *Rusalii*, it would have become an independent text around the fourteenth or the fifteenth century,[102] being a part of later miscellanies. Actually, it was one of the most popular and widely known episodes of the *Vita*. It recounts how during a festival a group of demons were dancing, singing and asking for money, while inside the church the faithful were singing matins. The demons got angry about this, and their leader tried to comfort them, showing how humans also celebrate worldly festivals to honour the devil, and specifically the musicians playing flutes and *gusli*.[103] The episode ends with the saint exhorting them to quit their devilish celebrations.[104] Like the *PVL*, the *Sermon* does not provide us with a temporal framework for the celebration of the *Rusalii*. Actually, the two texts may be related among to each other.

In contrast, a later passage provides a chronological identification between the *Rusalii* and the holiday of Pentecost. This text, attributed to a certain "Peter the Unworthy," bears the title *Tale of Peter the Unworthy on Fasting and Prayer from the Canon and Ecclesiastical Order*.[105] It is included in the fol. 56v–59r of the manuscript known as *Troitskii Sbornik*,[106] an anthology of edifying texts that would have been

99 Gribble, "Earliest Slavic Attestations of the Custom of *Rusalii*," 44.

100 Rystenko, *Materiyali z istorii vizantiisko-slov'yans'koi literaturi ta movi*.

101 Gribble, "Origins of the Slavic Short Version of the Life of Nifont," 9–19.

102 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 263.

103 Ancient East Slavic string instrument.

104 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 333–34.

105 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 141–63.

106 Ms RGB Col. Tr. № 12.

compiled in the Kievan Rus' between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century, based on South Slavic sources, most probably Bulgarian, such as the *Zlatostrui* or the *Izbornik of Tsar Simeon*, among others. However, the sources of the *Tale of Peter the Unworthy* remain unidentified, as well as its authorship, for it is not clear who "Peter the Unworthy" was, either Tsar Peter I himself of Bulgaria (927–969),[107] or the writer *Pëtrъ Ruskij*, whose name appears in the lists of the most renowned authors of Byzantine and Slavonic apochryphal works.[108] In any case, most authors agree that the work is an original East Slavic composition, and not a mere translation.[109] Actually, the message fits very well into the ideological context of the East Slavic society and the Christian Church in their beginnings. In the *Tale*, the Christians are warned to follow in their behaviour the divine commandments of life properly, while respecting the sacred feasts and fasting periods, such as those prescribed for the period "after the Coming of the Holy Spirit, that is, after the *Rusalii*."[110]

Therefore, we can see that at the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth century, the word *Rusalii* had become a popular synonym of Pentecost. Its usage had been normalized in Christian terms and had been incorporated into the liturgical calendar, depriving it of its negative connotations. However, the festivals that were celebrated during that period were still being condemned by the authors of sermons, and therefore the *Rusalii* continues to appear together with the typical music and dances from the spring celebrations. Therefore, we find it in a later text that could be dated to the end of the thirteenth century. It is the *Sermon on Peter and Philip's Great Fast*,[111] which gives instructions to the faithful in order to accomplish the fasting prescribed by the Orthodox Church for those days and also criticizes the worldly customs observed by them at the time with a long list of acts considered shameful for a Christian. Some of them are general in nature, while others were related to Easter fasting. The Sermon in its earlier and longer form appears in the *Troitskii spisok* (fol. 96r) from the first redaction of the *Zlataia Tsep'* (*Golden Chain*),[112] dating back to the end of the thirteenth century and having an East Slavic origin. Though it is linked by its title to the Byzantine tradition of the Latin *Catenae* (*Chains*, Greek σειραί), it differs from them in its contents, for it contains a variety of edifying texts instead of the comments on the Old Testament that were found in the Byzantine works. Among the evil acts that are condemned, it mentions the *Rusalii*.[113]

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107 Popovski, Thomson and Veder, *The Troickij Sbornik*, 2.

108 Petukhov, "Materialy i zametki po istorii drevnei russkoi pis'mennosti. Pouchenie Petra o poste i molitve," 151.

109 Petukhov, "Materialy i zametki po istorii drevnei russkoi pis'mennosti. Pouchenie Petra o poste i molitve," 151.

110 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 349–50.

111 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 224–47.

112 Ms RGB Col. Tr., № 11.

113 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 394.

In addition to the aforementioned texts, in which the chronological framework coincides with the Christian celebration of Pentecost, we have a later East Slavic testimony, in which the term *Rusalii* refers to the summer festival of the eve of St John's Day, on June 23, and therefore corresponds to the pre-Christian celebration of the summer solstice. It is found in the sixteenth-century *Stoglav*,[114] the proceedings of the Council of the One Hundred Chapters that was held in Moscow in 1551 during Tsar Ivan IV's reign. It contains chapter after chapter of answers by the Council to the tsar's questions about different aspects of the church's operations, as well as regarding the lives of the clergymen and laymen. It also shows that the heathen rites were deeply rooted among the Eastern Slavs, surviving long after their Christianization in the popular religion. Specifically, this allusion to the summer *Rusalii* can be found in the tsar's question 24 contained in chapter 41:

> Question 24. At the *Rusalii* for [St.] John's day[115] and on the Eves of Christmas, and of Epiphany men and women gather together, and maidens, for night games [splashing?] and for improper conversations, and devilish songs, and for dancing and skipping, and for impious acts. And there happens defilement by lads and seduction by maidens. And when the night has passed, then they go to the river with a great cry, like devils, and wash themselves with water. And when the morning [bells] start to ring, then they go to their homes and fall, like the dead, from the great noise.[116]

As in other sources that we discussed earlier, the condemnation of the *Rusalii* here is lumped together with other festivals linked to the calendar, especially those celebrated during the winter from the festival called *Koliada*, as mentioned by other texts. Therefore, as Linda Ivanits[117] has pointed out, a kind of "pre-Christian calendar" is drafted marking two central moments coinciding with key periods in the agrarian and plant cycle: the death of nature in the winter and its rebirth in the spring. Additionally, the condemnation of such festivals that happen to coincide with major Christian holidays is due to the feasting, dancing and singing, as well as of the lust during the frenzied gatherings of young men and women. In this specific case of the *Rusalii* for St. John's day, the bathing in the rivers and the water as a symbol of fertility played an important role. However, postponing the date for the celebration of *Rusalii* from Pentecost until the eve of St. John's could be motivated by the semantic change in this term. We must not forget that Pentecost is mentioned indirectly in the *Stoglav* as part of question 23 belonging in the same chapter, when it stated that on Trinity Sunday there were gatherings of men and women at cemeteries who began by weeping at the graves and later singing and dancing. It might therefore refer here to worship of the dead, as we will discuss in Chapter 5.

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114 Ëmchenko, *Stoglav. Issledovanie i tekst*.

115 The Nativity of Saint John, on June 24, is known in Russia as *Ivanov den'*, or *Ivan Kupala*'s Day. *Kupala* is derived from the Slavic word for bathing, and was reinterpreted as the commemoration of St. John's action of baptizing people through full immersion in water.

116 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 38.

117 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 17.

Consequently, throughout the whole medieval East Slavic homiletics we can find in parallel a double semantic value for the term *Rusalii*. First, it is equated with the practices linked to the celebration of the arrival of spring, including music, dances and theatrical plays that take place in spite of ecclesiastical prescription and disregarding the fasting prescribed by the Orthodox Church. Second, it became a popular name for Pentecost and was assimilated into the Christian liturgical calendar.

To conclude, we can say that the name *Rusalii*, taken from the classical tradition to dignify a type of festivities associated with the beginning of spring, spread from a cultivated Byzantine context. It was applied first to the spring festival of the South Slavs of the Balkans and later, as a consequence of the translations of the Byzantine ecclesiastical canons, was attached to a kind of fertility feast celebrated also by the East Slavs.

Other Spring Festivals in the Western Slavic Realm

In the process of Christianization of the West Slavs, there were also condemnations by the church targeting spring celebrations, very similar to those from the *Rusalii* that we just have described among the South and East Slavs.

The oldest text with reference to the festivals celebrated in spring was written by Cosmas of Prague in his *Chronica Bohemorum* (*Chronicle of the Czechs*),[118] dating from the first quarter of the twelfth century. This medieval historian from Bohemia lived between the second half of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century, being canon priest and dean at St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague. His chronicle would have been written between 1119 and 1125, and recounts the history of the Czechs, starting from their legendary origins up until the times of the author. The fragment that describes and condemns the pre-Christian festivals that were linked to the Christian celebration of Pentecost, similar to the *Rusalii* among the South and East Slavs, is to be found at the beginning of the third book. This volume begins with the narration of the ascension to the throne of Břetislav II on September 1092.[119] The new duke is portrayed as a fierce enemy of what remains of Slavic paganism, which can be seen as proof of its persistence among Czech peasants.[120] The passage reads as follows:

> III.1. Burning with great zeal for the Christian religion at the beginning of his rule, he [Duke Břetislav II] expelled all the magicians, prophets, and soothsayers from the midst of his realm. He also eradicated and consumed with fire the trees and meadows which the base commoners worshipped in many places. So also the superstitious practices which the villagers, still half-pagan, observed on the third or fourth day of Pentecost, offering libations over springs, offering sacrifices, and making offerings to demons; the burials they made in forests and fields; the plays they performed according to the pagan rite at crossroads and crossroad temples as if for the suppression of spirits; and the profane jests, which they performed over the dead, rousing useless ghosts, wearing masks on

118 Bretholz, *Die Chronik der Böhmen des Cosmas von Prag*.

119 Duke Břetislav II of Bohemia (1092–1110), son of Vratislav II and successor of Conrad I.

120 Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom*, 108.

> their faces, and revelling. The good Duke exterminated these abominations and other sacrileges, so they might no longer persist among the people of God.[121]

The text gives us precise information on the dates when the Czechs celebrated those festivals, on the third or fourth day of Pentecost, which would link them to the *Rusalii* of the South and East Slavs. However, we can find an important innovation in this source that would explain the later evolution of the festival among the South and East Slavs: the joy at the rebirth of vegetation and the renewal of the earth is combined with worship of the deceased forefathers, with whom the former is shared somehow. This is exactly the same thing that we just saw in the previous section regarding the practices mentioned in question 23 of the Russian *Stoglav*, condemning the activities performed in the cemeteries on Trinity Sunday. This celebration would be the origin of the "theatrical" aspect that since the eleventh century those spring festivities seemed to feature, for those rituals devoted to worshipping the dead would include not only libations and "minor" sacrifices in the springs and crossroads—where the spirits of the dead were thought to appear to the living coinciding with the rebirth of nature—but also the action of wearing a disguise portraying ghosts or the dead (*induti faciem laruis*). In these ritualized disguises would lie the roots of the theatrical plays that we have seen in other testimonies dealing with the winter festival of *Koliada*. Probably the letter number 55 addressed by Pope Innocent III to the bishop of Gniezno[122] in the thirteenth century was referring to these "ghosts," when he condemned the performance of theatrical plays inside churches with *monstra laruarum* (ghost masks).[123]

The date of the festivals condemned by the ecclesiastical legislators in Poland during the fourteenth century and the fifteenth century gives us an idea of how long these spring rituals survived. In the *Synod Statutes from Krakow*,[124] which brings together the canon law of this archdiocese, in the conclusions issued in 1408 it states:

> On the pagan rites preserved until nowadays by Christians. […] Therefore, we forbid that during Pentecost were sung pagan chants with which are invoked and worshipped idols; the people of Christ should rather be faithful and keep apart from them with all their strength, in order to expel the cult of the idols and to embrace what is convenient for the Catholic faith, and to do what is a benefit for their own salvation.[125]

One can easily notice that those festivals with demonstrations of joy for the arrival of the spring, expressed by means of chants, take place during Pentecost, the same as *Rusalii.*

Dating back to the same period there are other texts, like the *Polish Sermons*, of great philological interest for they contain a lot of medieval Polish vocabulary.[126] In them it is

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121 Wolverton, *Cosmas of Prague. The Chronicle of the Czechs,* 183–85.

122 Kraszewski, *Codex diplomaticus maioris Poloniae*, I, 58.

123 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 204.

124 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 65–66.

125 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 223.

126 Ms. *Leningradensis Lat.* I Quarto Nº 244; Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 69–76.

stated on the Pentecost celebrations as follows: "There are also those who in the days of Pentecost are feasting in the name of pagan demons, or those who do not want to sleep indoor, or do not speak to nobody, or go barefoot as if they could not save themselves in a different way."[127]

Unfortunately, the Polish preacher does not say the name of those festivals during Pentecost. He does not describe either the main characteristics of the festivities, but other secondary activities that seem to be penitential, such as sleeping outdoors, the ritualized silence or to walk barefoot, something that could be probably related to the cult of the dead that we have seen in the testimony of Cosmas of Prague quoted previously.

In contrast, Jan Długosz (1415–1480) does mention explicitly the Polish name of the Pentecost celebrations. This Polish writer, known by his Latin name, Ioannes Longinus, was canon priest of the cathedral of Krakow and secretary of the cardinal Zbigniew Oleśnicki (1389–1455). He accomplished several diplomatic missions under the rule of King Casimir IV Jagiellon (1440–1492), being appointed as archbishop of Lviv short before his death. His work as chronicler is very prolific. Among others, he wrote the *Annales seu cronicae incliti regni Poloniae*, 12 books on the history of Poland and Eastern Europe.[128] As a historian, he gave priority to the beauty of style over the veracity of facts. Moreover, his chronicles have an ideological purpose, to demonstrate that every single historical event is influenced by Divine Providence. In particular, we have to bear in mind that the texts which referred to the Slavic paganism traced back to the mythical origins of Poland are mostly fictional, and they simply seek to reproduce in a Slavic pantheon of imaginary names the structure of the Roman pantheon. According to his *Annales* I, the festivals of Pentecost in Poland were called *Stado*:

> The Poles, though we know that they profess the Christian faith since five hundred years, they continue repeating even nowadays the rite of those festivals and other relics every year on the day of Pentecost, and they commemorate their ancient pagan superstitions in an annual festivity, that in their language is called *Stado*, that is "group," for groups of people gather to celebrate it, and split in parties or bands they do celebrate it, with exalted and seditious minds, delivered to all kinds of pleasures, vices and orgies.[129]

The ritualized joy for the arrival of the spring is attested to in the *Statutes of the Polish Provinces* (262 b), as have come down to us in the Manuscript Ossolinense, that dates back to 1627 but refers to the fifteenth century:[130]

> Likewise, forbid the clapping and the songs in which are invoked the names of the idols *lado yleli yassa* and *tya*, that used to be done during the festivity of Pentecost, for as a matter of fact the believers in Christ must invoke God in that moment at night, in order that the same as the apostles they could have the capability of receiving the Holy Spirit, whom they will not be worthy to receive unless they were based on the advantageous Catholic faith.[131]

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127 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 229.

128 Mansikka, *Die Religion der Ostslaven*, 133–35; Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 66.

129 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 478.

130 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 76.

131 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 241.

The names of the idols are not fully comprehensible and they may well have been already totally distorted, but what is deduced from the text is that during Pentecost were celebrated festivals with ritual chants of joy for the coming of the spring.

Likewise, in a text known as *Postscript from a Polish Hussite*, attributed to an anonymous Hussite[132] author of Polish origin,[133] it is condemned the idolatry practised during the period of Pentecost:

> And so the Poles, that still worship in Pentecost the idols *Alado gardzyna yesse* on the day of their calends; and with great pain in that period it is shown by the bad Christians a higher esteem for those idols than for God, for the young girls who in the whole year did not use to go to church in order to venerate God, in that time they use to gather to worship the idols.[134]

To sum up, all the aforementioned texts agree in attributing to the period of Pentecost something that we have seen too in the celebration of the *Rusalii* among the South and East Slavs: the joy for the arrival of the spring expressed by means of ritualized chants. Additionally, in the oldest testimony, belonging to Cosmas of Prague's *Chronica Bohemorum*, complementary relevant information is provided: the joy for the rebirth of nature is combined with the commemoration of the deceased, who are expected also to be reborn somehow at that time. Such rebirth of the dead forefathers would have as its ritualized expressions certain theatrical plays that were performed with the help of masks.

Rituals Related to Fertility Deities

Rod and *Rozhanitsy*

Two important fertility deities that are referred to in the East Slavic sources are *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*. They appear together in almost all texts, and always in the combination of a singular masculine deity (*Rod*) accompanied by several feminine deities (*Rozhanitsy*). Different authors identified them with household death deities, and the *Rozhanitsy* have even been equated with the Roman *Parcae* or the Greek *Moirae*, the personifications of destiny.[135]

The traditional interpretation of these figures worthy to be worshipped is based mostly on the etymology of their names: OCS *rodъ* is a masculine deverbal noun formed on the verb *roditi*, which means "to bear." In the oldest texts it translates the Greek γενετή (birth), but also the Greek γένος, αἷμα (race, kin, generation).[136] *Rod* appears

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132 Christian reformist movement of the followers of the Czech theologian Jan Hus (c. 1369–1445), that spread throughout the lands of the Kingdom of Bohemia and the surrounding countries prior to the Protestant Reformation.

133 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 76.

134 Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 241.

135 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 14–15.

136 Tseitlin et al., *Staroslavyanskii slovar' (po rukopisyam X–XI vekov)*, 583–84.

together with one or several female characters that show a certain formal variation in their names: sg. *Rozhenitsa*, *Rozhdenitsa*, *Rozhdanitsa*, pl. *Rozhanitsy*, *Rozhenitsy*, *Rozhdenitsy*. In any case, all these names are derived from the Common Slavic form that is attested in the neuter noun *rozhdenie*, which translates to the Greek τόκος, κύησις (birth) and that with a collective meaning can also render the Greek οἱ συγγενείς, οἱ ὁμογενείς, συγγέννεια, γένος (descent). Based on this etymological interpretation, Rybakov[137] thought that *Rozhanitsy* were fertility deities associated with the agrarian cycle of harvest, bearing in mind that their festivity was celebrated around September 8, the feast day of the Nativity of the Virgin and the period of the harvest. According to Rybakov, *Rozhanitsy* mentioned always in plural would have been Christianized by assimilating them to two saint mothers: the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne, the "mother of the mother." Rybakov's interpretation has been considered too imaginative by later authors.[138]

From our point of view, while considering that the etymological interpretation leads us towards the reproductive function or to the family bonds of *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*, they were already desemantized names by the time they appeared in several East Slavonic sermons dating back to the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. The linguistic evolution of this type of personification can be very unstable. For instance, in an interpolation from chapter 93 of the sixteenth-century *Stoglav* in the commentary on rule 61 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, we can find "those who believe in destiny and genealogy, that is, in *Rozhdanitsa*, are condemned,"[139] which would be identifying this name with the magic practice of predicting the destiny of the newborn child. This would explain the adaptation in Slavonic folklore as mentioned by West,[140] who describes the *Rozhanitsy* as "supernatural females who appear at midnight within three days of a birth, mostly in threes, sometimes in a larger group, sometimes in the form of beautiful maidens, sometimes as grandmotherly old women, and pronounce destinies."

It is our aim to analyze the testimonies of medieval East Slavonic sermons in order to determine the type of ritual practice associated with *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* and see if this practice has parallels in other religions belonging to the Indo-European domain. Therefore, our analysis has nothing to do with an eventual belief in alleged East Slavic deities, but with the reality of those ritual practices, as well as with their importance for the reconstruction of Slavic pre-Christian religion and the possibility of comparing them to other similar rites of the Slavic and Indo-European realms.[141]

In the sermons, *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* appear in different devotional contexts. First, they are linked to a sacrifice that is described as the "table set up for *Rozhanitsy*," which

137 Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 593–636.

138 Klein, "Pamiati iazycheskogo boga Roda," 13–26; Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 59n41; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 29.

139 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 21.

140 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 384–85.

141 On the importance of rites for the reconstruction of the Indo-European religion, see Dowden, *European Paganism,* 167.

can be found in the twelfth-century *Sermon Commented by the Wisdom of the Holy Apostles and Prophets and Fathers on the Creation and the Day Called Sunday*.[142] They also appear four times in an almost monographic sermon with the title of *Sermon by the Prophet Isaiah, Commented by Saint John Chrysostom, on Those Who Set a Second Table for Rod and Roženicy*.[143] Here the figures of *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* are identified explicitly with "idols."

Second, the offerings were described using various terms. The words "unlawful" or "false" were used in the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*.[144] It should be noted that in the earliest version of this sermon, contained in the fourteenth-century *Paisievskii Sbornik*, the difference between the table for the *kut'ja*[145] and the table for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*[146] is established clearly, the former being qualified as "rightful" and the latter as "false." Another qualifying adjective received by the table of the food offerings for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* is the ordinal number "second," as we have seen already in the title of the monographic sermon. Likewise, it appears in the *Sermon by Saint Gregory, Found in the Comments, on How the Ancient Nations, When Pagan, Worshipped Idols and Offered Sacrifices to Them, and Continue to Do So Now*.[147]

In a similar vein, this term can be found in the penitential *Commandments of the Holy Fathers to the Sons and Daughters Who Confess*.[148] In this text, containing the oldest reference to this practice, the second table dedicated to *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* is mixed with the *Troparion*, the hymn devoted to the Mother of God. As Stella Rock[149] states,

> if indeed *rozhanitsy* are related to birth, as the name implies, this connection with Mary would be a logical one in the minds of neophyte Slavs, since the figure of the Mother of God has traditionally been appealed to by believers concerned with matters of fertility and childbirth.

However, another plausible explanation would be that the "priests serving their bellies" added the *Troparion* of the Nativity of the Virgin to the feast of *Rozhanitsy* in order to justify the pagan ritual activity.[150] The nature of the second table set up for the

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142 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 76–83; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 385–91.

143 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 84–95; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 407–9.

144 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 36–48; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 385.

145 Ritual food, a type of porridge made of wheat and honey, according to Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22, 168n41.

146 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22, 168n42; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 385.

147 Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 22–25; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 366.

148 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 322.

149 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22.

150 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 24.

sacrifice devoted to *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* is related to the place and the practice: the first table is the Christian altar and the second one is the pagan offering that coexists with it.

The only text that explains the composition of the offerings placed on the table for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* is the twelfth-century *Questions of Cyricus, Sava and Ilya to the Bishop Niphont of Novgorod*,[151] where it is said that the offering consisted of bread, cheese and honey, including drinking to honour *Rozhanitsy* (question number 33).[152] In this respect, Rock[153] considers that "it seems conceivable that rather than '*rod*' representing here a specific deity and *rozhanitsa* (singular in her text) meaning 'spirit of birth' or 'fate,' they might instead be translated as 'childbirth' and 'a woman giving birth' respectively," based on the canonical prohibitions on special meals in honour of the Nativity. However, bearing in mind that in Smirnov's edition[154] the second mention of *Rozhanitsy* appears in plural, Rock's interpretation loses its strength and the relationship between the celebrations of ordinary births and the Nativity of Christ suggested by the author is not clear.

As a summary, we can conclude that between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries in the Kievan Rus' a special type of sacrifice devoted to minor deities that consisted of bread, cheese, honey and drinking (most probably mead), offered and consumed inside of the churches was still practised. The sacralization of the food and drinks was justified by the sacral character of the Christian temple where the tables were located and it could even be accompanied by a Christian prayer, such as the *Troparion* to the Mother of God. From a purely formal perspective, three fixed elements of the ritual can be identified: the table with the offerings, the fact that they were bloodless, and the intended recipients, certain minor deities.

The methodological bias considering that East Slavic religious expressions are unique and isolated vis-à-vis other Slavic groups has meant that the presence of tables inside temples in other Slavic religious traditions has been disregarded. Actually, worship tables among the West Slavs can also be found, although they have a slightly different function. In the *Dialogue on the Life of St. Otto of Bamberg* (II, 32–33), written by the monk Herbord in the twelfth century, detailed descriptions are provided of the four temples or *contine* of the city of Szczecin. The main temple, which was dedicated to the three-headed god Triglav, was used to store the enemies' wealth and weapons captured in wars. The other three adjacent buildings, which could be less important halls of worship, "only had seats and tables on the inside as the people were accustomed

151 Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 1–27; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 325–28.

152 Here Rock translates *rozhanitsa* in the singular, following most probably the edition of Pavlov. Cf. Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 23; Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* col. 31. In contrast, Álvarez-Pedrosa translates the second mention in the plural following the edition of Smirnov. Cf. Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 328; Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 10.

153 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 23.

154 Smirnov, *Materialy dlya istorii*, 10.

to hold councils and meetings there. For they like to drink, play, and transact serious business there and in the same temple they met on certain days and hours."[155] Therefore, these were ritualized banquets, for they were celebrated on set days and hours, and were employed not only to feast but also to take important decisions.

In the ancient Greek religious tradition a parallel ritual element exists. It has been called *trapezómata*[156] by scholars in a conventional way, when they refer to the offerings placed on a table, τράπεζαι (tables) being the most frequent designation found in the ancient texts. The Grammarian Pollux (6.83–84) explains that for "tables," we must understand the offerings that were placed on them. The link between tables and the place of worship was warranted by the inscriptions. For instance, there is an inscription from the first century BCE in Esmirna (*SIG*3 996) that mentions a table in front of the statue of Helios Apollo Cisauloddono. The literary testimonies confirm this custom. Pausanias (8.31.3–4) describes the bas-relief of a table standing in front of a statue of Heracles in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore of Megalopolis.[157]

Frequently, the tables and the offerings placed on them are associated with the worship of heroes or minor divinities. For example, in the oldest calendar of worship from Athens that has come down to us, dating back to the fifth century BCE, a table is established for Semele (*IG* I3 234, 18–19). In addition, tables can be found in the sacred calendar of Thorikos (*SEG* 33, 147) dedicated to several heroines. In these cases, the offerings put on the table are considered as a complement to a blood sacrifice devoted to a superior deity. According to Aristophanes' comedy *Plutus* (676–678), on the tables that were inside the temples food offerings such as cakes and dried figs were laid out. In spite of the fact that many of the testimonies say bloodless offerings were placed on the tables of worship, some of the rituals prescribed both blood and bloodless offerings.[158] In the scholia of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 7,[159] when recounting the rites of Haloa, an Attic harvest festival to honour Demeter, Kore and Dionysos, the scholiast says that the *arkhontai* prepared the tables, which were full of all food from the land and the sea, except those things forbidden in the mysteries of Eleusis. An explanation for the rite is that civilized food was found by the gods and shared with humankind. On the tables, the genitals of both sexes made of bread were also placed. The *arkhontai* left their women inside together with the offerings.

The τράπεζαι appear too in a wider and more complex ritual called *theoxénia*, in which gods and heroes were the guests of humans,[160] and beds and tables were prepared

155 Słupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 73; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 137.

156 The most exhaustive study was made by Gill, "Trapezomata: A Neglected Aspect of Greek Sacrifice," 117–37.

157 Gill, "Trapezomata: A Neglected Aspect of Greek Sacrifice," 7–11; Mattern, "Griechische Kultbildschranken," 158.

158 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 151–52.

159 Rabe, *Scholia in Lucianum*, 275, 22ff.

160 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 150.

where they could drink and eat. It was a cheaper alternative to the animal sacrifices and common in the private domain.[161] The purpose of the *theoxénia* could have been to bring the god or hero closer to the offerer, establishing between them ties of hospitality that would later be beneficial for humans. Moreover, the *theoxénia* became an occasion to celebrate a sacral collective banquet.[162] Probably the oldest testimony of a *theoxénia* is an Attic inscription (*IG* I^3 255), with a list of rituals to honour the superior gods (Aphrodite, Zeus Troppaeus and Apollo) that mentioned the tables together with the beds prepared for the respective associated deities and heroes (Eros, Hyppolitos and Heracles).

In short, as stated by Jameson,[163] the primary function of *theoxénia* was the celebration of a collective banquet to which the gods, who were usually far away from the human community, were invited. The sacral context where it was performed favoured the integration of humans and divinities.

Something similar happened in Rome with the ritual known as *lectisternium*. In it the gods participated in the shape of their effigies reclining on a couch (Latin *lectum*), with their left arm resting on a cushion before one or several tables with food offerings. The deities would be set up in pairs, dressed in drapery appropriate for the ritual. This probably had a function similar to the aforementioned *theoxénia.* Possibly the earliest epigraphic testimony we have is a bronze tablet from Lavinium from the third century BCE in which a *lectisternium* is offered to Ceres and Vesperna.[164] Livy's *Books on the Foundation of the City* (36.1 and 42.30) state that *lectisternia* were celebrated during the whole year, although with less solemnity. We have better information regarding the *lectisternia* that took place after important disasters in Rome, where they were clearly used with a purifying purpose. Livy (5.13.4–8) gives a detailed account of the celebration of what he called "the first *lectisternium*" in the history of Rome after a severe winter and subsequent plague that spread in 399 BCE. The Sybilline Books were consulted and the *duumviri* in charge of the religious festivals organized a *lectisternium* that lasted eight days. It was dedicated to three pairs of divinities: Apollo and Latona, Diana and Hercules, and Mercury and Neptune. The celebration even included expressions of hospitality towards the prisoners. Another great public *lectisternium* took place in 217 BCE after the Roman defeat at Lake Trasimene by the Carthaginians.[165] A rite of purification was celebrated for the religious crime committed by consul Gaius Flaminius, who went to battle against the Carthaginians without taking the prescribed auguries. The *lectisternium* lasted three days and was organized by *decemviri* and dedicated to six pairs of gods: Jupiter and Juno, Neptune and Minerva, Mars and Venus, Apollo and Diana, Vulcan and Vesta, and Mercury and Ceres.[166] The last solemn and public *lectisternium* took place in 204 BCE and it is

161 Ekroth, *The Sacrificial Rituals of Greek Hero-Cults*, 129–213; Ekroth, "Heroes and Hero-Cults," 107.

162 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 160–63.

163 Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*, 172.

164 Guarducci, "Nuove osservazioni sulla lamina bronzea di Cerere a Lavinio," 411–25.

165 Livy, *Books on the Foundation of the City,* 22.10.8.

166 Nouilhan, "Les lectisternes républicains," 27–41.

not clear if its aim was to celebrate the arrival in Rome of the statue of the Magna Mater or to avoid the bad omens that could damage the city during the Second Punic War.[167] Nowadays, the traditional theory stating that the Roman *lectisternia* were a borrowing from the Greek religious tradition has been dismissed.[168] They can be divided into two types. First, there was the private ceremony that was celebrated during the whole Roman religious tradition. It had the aim of offering a banquet to the gods, while respecting the higher nature of the divinities and the hierarchical structure of society. Second, there was the public variant as witnessed by Livy, which included a performance and implied expressions of hospitality and social integration.[169]

As a summary, the East Slavic tables with offerings for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* have parallels in other Western Indo-European religious traditions, such as the Greek and the Roman. All of them share some elements, like the presence of a table in a sacral context. The function of the table can be limited to holding mostly bloodless offerings, as can be seen in the Slavic and Greek traditions. It seems originally to have been a ritual dedicated to minor deities. However, in ancient times the rite could have been simpler and more functional, with the aim of inviting both heroes and gods so that they felt a connection with the person who offered the sacrifice. This function of a bond with the gods goes beyond the city of Athens, with examples in Delphi especially and in other places in ancient Greece. The invitation to the gods became a way to keep misfortunes away from the city, mainly in ancient Rome, or to overcome a disaster that had already happened.

Various central elements of the rite can be suggested. It was a simple structure marked by a table as a container for the offerings, which used to be bloodless and, as a consequence, not expensive. The recipients of the offerings would be, in principle, minor divinities. This core ritual went through functional changes: on the one hand, the offerings could be replaced by a blood sacrifice, and on the other hand, the recipients could be deities belonging to a higher rank. Increasing the type of the offerings and the recipients of the offerings enlarges the functional framework of the sacrifice, to the point of transforming it into a public celebration seeking to strengthen the social bonds among the community members by means of ritualized periodical banquets and, in periods of collective crisis, to stave off evil from the city.

Svarozhich

Besides *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy*, the historical sources mention other deities to whom fertility rites are dedicated. For instance, in the *Statute of Prince Vladimir*,[170] allegedly authored by Prince Vladimir I himself after his baptism in 988, among the crimes mentioned to be judged by the ecclesiastical courts appear the following: "if someone

167 Livy, *Books on the Foundation of the City*, 29.14.

168 Scheid, "Nouveau rite et nouvelle piété: Réfléxions sur le ritus Graecus," 168–82.

169 Estienne, "Vie et mort d'un rituel romain. Le lectisterne," 15–21.

170 Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 621–27.

prays beneath the granary or in the forest or in the water."[171] The word *ovinŭ* (granary) can be translated also as "threshing barn" or "oven for drying cereals."[172] This meaning is more explicit in the allusion that is made in a passage of the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*, when stating:

> Because of that, Christians must not celebrate devilish festivals, that is, dancing, singing worldly songs, and making offerings to the gods, to the fire under the threshing barn nor to make prayers to the *vily*, to Mokosh, to *Sim* and *R'gl*, to Perun, to *Rod*, to the *Rozhanitsy*, and all similar ones.[173]

The custom of praying under the granary or under the threshing barn appears together with praying in the stables in the subsequent Chudovskii redaction of the *Sermon of Saint Gregory*.[174] It seems plausible that it was an agrarian rite related to the harvest, especially if we take into account the statement in the *Sermon of Saint Gregory*: "Fire dries and ripens this abundance."[175] In another excerpt from the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ* the fire is embodied by the pagan god Svarozhich, who is mentioned together with other deities:

> so he [God], too being unable to bear Christians who live a double faith and believe in Perun and Khors, Mokoš, Sim and Rgl and in the Vily, who number thirty ninth[176] sisters,—so say ignorant people who consider them goddesses—and thus give them offerings and cut the throats of hens and pray to fire, calling it Svarožic.[177]

The first five deities belong to the pantheon erected by Prince Vladimir in Kiev a few years before his baptism in 980, as can be read in the *PVL*.[178] Perun was the supreme god, the god of thunder; Khors has been identified with an Iranian solar deity; Mokosh is the moist mother earth; and *Sim* and *R'gl* would be a corruption of Simar'gl, a mythological creature from the Iranian religion, who was related to the harvest.[179] It would represent also the fire element, the same as Khors, the sun. In contrast, Mokosh is the fertile earth, and Perun could be interpreted in this context as the provider of rain. Regarding Dazh'bog, as Stella Rock[180] stated,

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171 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 308n121.

172 "In the Russian North this was a two-level structure, the first level containing a primitive furnace partly entrenched in earth and the second the floor on which the sheaves of grain were dried.": Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 60.

173 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 384.

174 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 30.

175 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 366.

176 In a variant "thirty": Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 382n316.

177 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 382–83; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 18.

178 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 278; Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 93.

179 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 13–14.

180 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 19.

> under the year 1114, the *Primary Chronicle* cites an unnamed chronicle on "the god Svarog" of the Egyptians, and his son Dazh'bog, the Sun. This is probably the Byzantine Chronicle of John Malalas, the Slavonic translation of which contains glosses naming the deities Hephaestus and Helios as Svarog and Dazh'bog respectively.

Therefore, we can identify Svarozhich, the "son of Svarog" judging by the meaning of its derivative suffix, with the Dazh'bog of Vladimir's pantheon, and likewise establish the same relationship between both of them with Svarog, specifically, between the fire in the sky (the sun) and his father the fire on earth. We see here how fire played an important role in the agrarian process of drying and ripening the harvest, and of course associated with the "fire in the sky," the sun. Additionally, certain rituals were dedicated to fire including prayers and offerings that were made in a special symbolic place: under the grain drying furnace.

As for the *vily*, they were absent in Vladimir's pantheon but are also attested to with this name among the Western and Southern Slavs. We will speak about them later in Chapter 5 dealing with funerary rites.[181]

Hennil/Bendil

Another fertility god among the West Slavs is the god *Hennil* (variant *Bendil*) as mentioned in Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (VII, 69).[182] The specific passage follows the account of a paranormal phenomenon that according to the chronicle occurred at a house in the village of Sülfeld[183] which had been taken over by invisible demons or spirits during the second week of December in 1017. The author draws on this strange event to describe the following Slavic pre-Christian custom preserved in this scarcely Christianized rural area:

> The inhabitants, who rarely go to church, do not concern themselves at all about their priests. They worship greatly their household gods and, in the hope of some benefit for themselves, perform sacrifices to them. I heard tell of a shepherd's staff, crowned by a hand holding an iron circle, which was carried from house to house by the shepherd of the village it was in, and as soon as it entered [the house] it was hailed by its bearer: "Keep watch, Bendil, keep watch!" for such was its name in their rustic tongue, and afterwards, over a banquet, the fools argued amicably about keeping it in their custody.[184]

Thus, it seems to be a god protector of the households, and therefore a fertility god. Its protecting role, as well as its agrarian (fertility) function, is shown in the attribute of the shepherd's staff, while the ring is associated in the Indo-European traditions to kingship[185] as well as with alliances, agreements and oaths. Actually, a new interpretation of the etymology of the variant reading of the theonym *Bendil*, which can be found in a

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181 See Chapter 5, The Living Dead among the East Slavs.

182 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 482–84.

183 Nearby the city of Wolfsburg, in Lower Saxony, in modern Germany.

184 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 75; Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 356.

185 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 424–25.

second manuscript, would link the name to the Indo-European stem *b^hend^h- (tie, bind). This would confirm the connection of the god with the binding oaths.[186] Furthermore, the fertility function would also be expressed by the abundant ritual banquet mentioned in the text. The relationship between the king's justice and the fertility of the land is well attested also among the Indo-European peoples, as remarked by West,[187] for whom the two were dependent on one another. The hand holding a ring reminds us of the four-headed idol found in the Zbruch River, one of whose four faces also holds a ring.[188] On the other sides it shows a horn, a sword and a horse respectively, which, except for the ring, are the same attributes of the idol of Sventovit of Arkona, as described by Saxo Grammaticus.[189] Therefore, the Zbruch idol would bring together the warrior function of the sword and the horse together with the fertility, represented by the horn, and justice or oaths, whose symbol would be the ring.[190] The same can also be said regarding *Hennil/Bendil.*

As for the association with roosters, the plausible Germanic interference of the scribe when transcribing the god's name into Latin as *Hennil* due to the influence of the Germanic term for "rooster,"[191] could be suggested. In addition, the invocation of the god with the words "Keep watch, Bendil, keep watch!" and the previous mention of the rooster's crow in the episode of the haunted house[192] could make *Hennil/Bendil* a night deity, bearing in mind the symbolism of the rooster's crow, which is linked to dawn and is believed to drive away the spirits of the dark in the folklore of the Slavic peoples.[193] This could be the reason why roosters or cockerels were offered as a sacrifice to the unclean spirits of nature such as *vily*, *bereginy* or *upiry*, as we will see in Chapter 5. Thietmar's fragment explains that the household gods like *Hennil/Bendil* receive sacrifices, but the kind of sacrifices is not specified.

The ritual of the god *Hennil*'s staff could be related to a shepherd's ritual attested by the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b)[194] that state:

> A certain reprehensible rite is also still practiced, whereby on the day of circumcision,[195] which is called the new year, a shepherd goes around the houses giving out branches, which cannot be received by bare hands, so that with those branches they make the sheep and livestock go towards the herd: who could have taught men this, if not the father of trickery and error?[196]

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186 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "¿Existió un dios eslavo Hennil?," 137.

187 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 422–23.

188 Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan*, 622–25; Słupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 217–26.

189 See The Description of a Harvest Ritual in the Sancturary of Arkona.

190 See Chapter 3, dealing with rites of everyday life, Ritual and Daily Life.

191 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "¿Existió un dios eslavo Hennil?," 137–38. *Cf.* OHG *hano* (rooster), Ger. *Hahn* (rooster) in Gramkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 515.

192 Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 355.

193 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 42, 120, 157, 181, 194, 204–5.

194 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 69–76.

195 The circumcision of Jesus traditionally is celebrated on January 1.

196 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 238.

If both rituals are one and the same, then they would coincide with the period of the celebration of the East Slavic pre-Christian festival known as *Koliada*.[197]

Pereplut

In the *Sermon by our holy father John Chrysostom on how the first pagans believed in idols*[198] together with Dazh'bog there is mention of a mysterious Pereplut:

> And others believe in Stribog, Dažbog and Pereplut, for whom they drink from horns while cavorting, having forgotten God who created heaven and earth, the seas and rivers. And this way they rejoice in their idols.[199]

As pointed out by Stella Rock[200] regarding this Pereplut, "nothing is known, although Rybakov indulges in a great deal of speculation about possible connections with rain and agriculture." However, we can say that the ritual action of drinking for this deity, together with the symbolic instrument they used in the ritual, the horn, would link it very clearly with abundance and the function of fertility, similar to the fertility ritual dedicated to the idol of Sventovit of Arkona among the Western Slavs.

In another sermon, the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*, we can find similar ritual drinking to honour the gods:

> and offer garlic to the gods when someone holds a banquet in his house, then they throw it in buckets and drink a cup to their idols, and in their joy they are no worse than the Jews and heretics.[201]

According to Stella Rock,[202] the garlic was thought to have apotropaic powers in the ancient world. However, in a later variant that appears in a fifteenth-century *Novgorodskii Sofiiskii Sobor* manuscript, this drinking ritual has an even more explicit sexual or phallic connotation:

> And when one of them celebrates a wedding, they entertain themselves with drums and pipes and many other demonic devices; and another rite is even more inimical than this: after making a false male phallus, they insert it in buckets and drink from cups, and when drunk they smell and lick and kiss it.[203]

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197 See Spring Festivals: Rusalia.

198 The full title is *Sermon by the Holy Father Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on How the First Pagans Believed in Idols, Offered Sacrifices to Them and Called Upon Them and Many Continue to Do So Now, for Even Though, Being Christians, They Do Not Know What Christianity Is*. Ed. by Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva s'' ostatkami yazychestva v'' Drevnei Rusi,* II, 59–61.

199 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 374. Italics added.

200 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 32.

201 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 383; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 21.

202 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 21.

203 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 383n321; Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 22.

Here the ritual drinking is performed in a very specific context: a wedding celebration. Additionally, a curious container with a phallic shape is employed. It could be related to an allusion contained in the same Sofiiskii redaction of the *Sermon by Saint Gregory, Found in the Comments, on How the Ancient Nations, When Pagan, Worshipped Idols and Offered Sacrifices to Them, and Continue to Do So Now*: "The same Slavs during the wedding celebrations put their private parts inside of a bucket with garlics and drink through ithyphallic objects."[204]

In both cases, the reproductive function is more than evident, and the purpose could be to increase the male fertility of the groom. The Slavs could have known the benefits of garlic for increasing the blood flow to the sexual organs. However, its use in the ritual could have been motivated also by its phallic shape. In any case, wedding rituals deserve a separate section among the fertility rites.

Wedding Rituals

We have seen above a fertility rite that has ritual drinking associated with a wedding celebration. In the earliest East Slavic sources other rituals can be found. For instance, in the *Church Statute of Prince Yaroslav*,[205] which is reported to have been prepared by the prince himself in the first half of the eleventh century, although it is preserved in a late fifteenth-century copy, the following food offering is condemned:

> 35. If someone steals (the dowry) from the bride and groom and for the marriage, everything (corresponds) to the Metropolitan. He who offers (cheese) for a maiden, one grivna[206] for the cheese, three grivnas for the dishonour and repayment of what has been lost, six grivnas for the Metropolitan, and the Prince shall impose a punishment.[207]

According to Golubinskii,[208] this likely refers to the repudiation of the bride by the groom after formalizing the betrothal, but it might instead be the practice of sealing the engagement with the pre-Christian custom of offering cheese.[209] It reminds us of the offerings of bread, cheese and honey (or mead) for *Rod* and *Rozhanitsy* that we discussed earlier. There is a similar food offering of eggs for betrothal that is attested among the Poles by the fifteenth-century *Synodal Statutes* of Andreas Bninski,[210] bishop of Poznań:

> XXXIV. On engagement with eggs. You must prohibit that on the Monday and Tuesday after Easter, men become engaged with women and the women with men through eggs and other presents, commonly called *dyngowacz*, and that they throw water on them.[211]

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204 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 362n257.

205 Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 629–38.

206 Currency in ancient Kievan Rus'.

207 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 310.

208 Golubinskii, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvy*, I, 635n5.

209 Kaiser, *The Laws of Rus': Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries*, 48.

210 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 77–78.

211 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 244.

The offerings of food and drink during a marriage were thus essential to guaranteeing the fertility of the couple. Water was also important, for the Chudovskii redaction of the *Sermon of Saint Gregory* says: "They throw brides who are to be married in the water, and drink a cup to the devil, throwing rings and belts into the water."[212] The text does not mention the name of the devil to whom they dedicated the drinking. We could think that it was either the same Pereplut from the *Sermon of Saint John Chrysostom* or even the nature spirits of the rivers and lakes, known as *vily*, *bereginy* or later *rusalki*, as we will see in Chapter 5, dealing with funerary rites. The throwing of rings and belts as symbols of engagements and bonds may be understood as an offering to the water spirits in order to ensure the fertility of the bride and as a way to seal the marriage, with the water spirits as witnesses. This custom of carrying the brides to the water is linked to the region of Novgorod in rule number 7 of the *Proceedings of the Council of Vladimir*[213] celebrated in 1274. It may even have been mentioned in the *PVL* in a description of the barbarian pagan customs of some Eastern Slavic tribes:

> And they [the Polyanians] had as a marriage custom that the bridegroom did not go to fetch his bride, but she was brought to him by night, and the following morning they took to her what they gave her. And the Derevljane lived savagely, lived like cattle, killed each other, ate all kinds of filth, and there was no marriage between them but they abducted virgins in the water. The Radimiči, Vjatiči and Severjane had a shared custom: they lived in the forest, like wild animals, eating all kinds of filth, and they spoke obscenities to each other in front of their parents and daughters-in-law and there was no marriage between them, but games between the villages, and they came together for the games, for the dances and for all types of diabolical songs, and there [the men] abducted the women; he who had arranged with one of them, as each man had two or three women.[214]

Whether it was done "in the water" or not, depending on the different readings of the text,[215] the fact is that in the fragment among the East Slavic tribe of the Derevlians the earliest Indo-European form of marriage is attested—the abduction of brides—the same as was practised by many Indo-European peoples according to the comparative linguistic data.[216] Mythological echoes of such a practice would be, for instance, the rape of the Sabine women in the Roman mythic tradition or the myth of the capture of Medea by the Argonauts, as well as the Homeric myths of the kidnapping of Persephone and the abduction of Helen in ancient Greek mythology. In this passage it is mentioned also that among some East Slavic tribes there was the custom of carrying off the brides during festivals in which ritual games, singing and dancing played an important role. This is similar to what we have already seen in the fertility festivals of *Rusalii* and,

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212 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 376n303.

213 Pavlov, *Pamyatniki drevne-russkogo kanonicheskogo prava,* cols. 83–102. For the English translation, see Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 340.

214 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 268.

215 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 268n26.

216 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans,* 658–60.

more specifically, in question 24 of chapter 41 of the sixteenth-century *Stoglav*, when condemning the *Rusalii* for St. John's Day, which involved the gathering of young men and women together with bathing in rivers and the celebration of "night games." It is possible that those night games were a kind of competition to win a wife, as has been observed by several Indo-European traditions.[217] However, as West[218] suggested, it could be explained rather as a "popular seasonal custom in which a girl chose a beau for the summer," something that would fit well with the celebrations on the eve of St. John's Day among the East Slavs as described by the *Stoglav*. Furthermore, in question 25, in the same chapter of the *Stoglav*, the festival called *v'iunets* is mentioned. It was celebrated in the first spring after the wedding in order to congratulate the newlyweds.[219]

To summarize, we can say that wedding rituals among the East Slavs contained the same constituent elements as other fertility rites that we have analyzed from different Slavic areas: the offering of food and drink, the ritualized actions of singing, dancing and playing games, as well as water as a symbol of fertility.

217 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 432–36.

218 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 436.

219 Propp, *Russkie agrarnye prazdniki*, 63–65.

Chapter 3

RITES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Ritual and Daily Life

As stated in Rappaport,[1] ritual helps societies protect themselves from the erosion of daily practice, sanctifying whatever it encodes, including everyday life actions and social conventions. Moreover, Rappaport[2] identifies two classes of rituals, "factive" and "commissive," depending on the actions that are performed, the former being the actions that "bring into being the states of affairs with which they are concerned" (declarations of peace, marriages, purifications, healings etc.) and the latter those actions that "merely bring into being the commitment of those performing them to do so sometime in the future" (oaths, pledges etc.). In the case of oaths, the same as in divination, there is an utterance or linguistic expression that is sanctified.[3]

Oaths and Pledges

According to Rappaport,[4]

> that the sanctification of commissives—oaths, pledges, and the like—is closely related to the sanctification of reports and testimony is at least strongly suggested by the derivation of the Old English and Old Norse terms for oath or pledge, *waer* and *var* respectively, from the Indo-European stem *wero-*, true, from which the Latin *verus*, true, and its descendants are also derived (American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd ed. 1992).

That is why keeping the oaths becomes a sacred duty and breaking them entails a divine punishment.

Precisely from the same Old Norse word *vár* (pledge, oath) mentioned by Rappaport came the name of the Varangians, the Scandinavian warriors migrating during the Viking Age to the Eastern European territory of the Kievan Rus', where a majority of Slavic peoples were settled. This way, Old Norse *væringjar* would mean "oath-bound warriors" for a majority of authors.[5] The Varangians became the military elite that controlled the trade routes from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea along different rivers and lakes, mainly along the Dnieper River and the Volga River respectively. In the *PVL*, this Scandinavian minority of warriors are called Rus' too, a term that was to subsequently give its name during the tenth century to the first East Slavic state.

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1 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 323.

2 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 115.

3 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

4 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

5 Thomsen, *The Relations between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia*, 111; Danylenko, "Urmani, Varjagi and Other Peoples in the Cosmography of the Primary Chronicle," 183–84.

In addition, in the same *PVL* there can be found several testimonies to the way the Varangian Rus' used to seal their peace treaties with the Byzantines, swearing by their gods Perun and Volos, "the god of cattle," and by their weapons, as we will discuss later in the chapter dealing with military rites. Specifically, it happened in the peace treaties of 907 and 971.[6] Moreover, in the *PVL* in the year 944, when narrating the signing of the agreement between the Byzantine envoys and the Rus'ian representatives of Prince Igor of Kiev, it is recounted that the Christian Rus' took an oath in the church of St. Elias, while the pagan ones did it by the idol of god Perun, as follows:

> (54) In the morning, Igor' summoned the envoys, and went to a hill on which there was a statue of Perun. The Russes laid down their weapons, their shields, and their gold ornaments, and Igor' and his people took oath (at least, such as were pagans), while the Christian Russes took oath in the church of St. Elias, which is above the creek, in the vicinity of the Pasyncha square and the quarter of the Khazars. This was, in fact, a parish church, since many of the Varangians were Christians.[7]

This clearly shows the equivalent mention at the same level of the church of St. Elijah and the idol of the god Perun, both of them sharing the same function as guarantors of the oaths. An important detail of this passage is the location of the church of St. Elijah on the top of the hill, something that according to Jane Baun[8] was very common both in Greek and Slavic lands. After Christianization, in the folklore and popular religion of the Orthodox Slavic peoples, the prophet Elijah took the role of the Slavic pre-Christian god Perun as a weather god.

As we mentioned before, in the peace treaties of the years 907 and 971, as attested by the *PVL*, the oaths were made by the gods Perun and Volos. The latter, called "the god of cattle," had also some eschatological connotations as god of the dead, as we will see later in the chapter dealing with the funerary rites. The pair of gods Perun–Volos could have worked among the East Slavs in a parallel way as the gods Mitra and Varuna in the Indo–Iranian tradition supervising justice, oaths and contracts; they were mentioned in a treaty between Hatti and Mittani dating back to the fourteenth century BCE.[9]

As for Perun, the etymology of his name would make him a "thunder god,"[10] and therefore a "sky god" in the highest position for the East Slavs, with the chance to see everything from above and to know everything, and be the ideal guardian of oaths. The god of lightning was the supreme deity for the South Slavs, too, as it is recounted by Procopius in his *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23): "For they believe that one god, the maker of the lightning, is alone lord of all things, and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims."[11]

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6 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 269, 277.

7 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 77.

8 Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium*, 206.

9 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 171–72.

10 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 694, 699.

11 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271.

Though he is not called by his proper name, he could be identified with the East Slavic Perun, considering both his attributions and functions. Moreover, in the twelfth-century *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 83),[12] written by the monk Helmold of Bosau, the West Slavs living in the region of Oldenburg[13] are said to worship Prone (or Prove) as their supreme deity. Concretely, the chronicle recounts the embassy of Bishop Gerald of Oldenburg to the Slavic lands of Prince Pribislav, who received him in his domains in the year 1156, crossing a sacred forest:

> I, 83: It happened that on the way we arrived at a forest, the only one in that territory, which extends along the entire territory, across a plain. There, among the ancient trees, we saw sacred oaks that had been dedicated to the god of that country, Prone; they were surrounded by a vestibule and a wooden fence built with great care that had two gates. For, besides the household deities and the idols that abounded in that hamlet, that place was a sanctuary for the entire country, to which a priest, religious festivities, and several sacrificial rites were assigned. Every Monday, the people met there in council with the prince and the priest to administer justice. Access to the vestibule was prohibited to all, except for the priest and those who wished to offer sacrifices or those in danger of death, who were never denied the right to refuge. For the veneration that the Slavs show for the aspects of their religion is so great that they do not tolerate the area around the sanctuary being tainted with blood, not even in times of war. They rarely accept solemn oaths, as for the Slavs swearing is like perjury and with it they expose themselves to the vengeful wrath of the gods.[14]

In the last sentence of the fragment we see the confirmation of Rappaport's words when speaking of the sanctification of oaths by rituals: "Such oaths transform reports or accounts into testimony, and common lies into perjury."[15] Here a god of justice associated with the oaks as his sacred trees is described, being the guardian of the oaths. Both bearing in mind the etymology of his name and his connection to the oaks, Prone has been identified with the East Slavic Perun by many authors.[16] This way, the oaks are both his representation and personification as guarantors of the oaths and of the justice delivered in their enclosure, the oaks and oak groves being connected to the thunder god in Indo-European traditions, as shown by their common etymology.[17]

Among the East Slavs, according to the *PVL*, an oak tree was the place where was performed the execution of the two sorcerers from Jaroslavl' who headed the rebellion in Beloozero in 1071.[18] In the chronicle's account, both sorcerers were hanged from an oak and left there unburied until a bear devoured their bodies. We could see here

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12 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 163.

13 Oldenburg in Holstein, in modern Germany.

14 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 162.

15 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

16 Leger, *La Mythologie slave*, 63; Jakobson, "Slavic Gods and Demons," 6; Lajoye, *Le dieu slave de l'orage Perun et ses successeurs chrétiens Élie et Georges*, 47.

17 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 527–28.

18 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 289.

the oak tree as the sacred place of justice and the hanging as a likely ritual method of execution,[19] leaving their corpses unburied to the beasts in order to avoid the inhumation of the bodies, something that could imply negative consequences for the community, bearing in mind the problematic nature of sorcerers even in the afterlife for the Slavic mentality,[20] as we will see in Chapter 5.

The following passage belonging to the aforementioned *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 83)[21] bears witness to the practice of swearing by the trees, springs and stones when recounting the destruction of the sacred groves by the Christian missionaries commanded by Bishop Gerald:

> As soon as he arrived[22] at Oldenburg, he began the work of God with great fervor and summoned the pagan Slavs to the grace of regeneration, cutting down the sacred forests and eliminating their sacrilegious rites [...]. The Slavs were subsequently prohibited from swearing on the trees, fountains, and rocks; instead, they presented those accused of a crime to the priest for him to probe them with an iron or plowshare.[23]

We see here, therefore, the oaths made by different natural elements (trees, waters and stones) or directly by the gods associated to those elements. Again among the West Slavs, Saxo Grammaticus (14.25.2) describes an oath proposed by a nobleman from the island of Rügen called Domborus as a guarantee of his good faith in requesting peace from the Danish Bishop Absalon. This rite involved throwing a stone into the water, because, as Saxo Grammaticus reports, "when the barbarians were going to make a deal, they observed the rite of throwing a pebble in the water, saying that if they broke the agreement, then they would perish, just as the stone had sunk."[24] This custom of validating an oath by throwing a stone seems to be well documented among the Indo-Europeans. In this case, the act of throwing the stone is likened to the destiny of he who breaks the oath, as the Roman negotiator says before the Carthaginians in Polybius (3.25):

> "If I swear truly, may only good come to me; if I think or act differently, while others see their homeland, their laws, their own lives, their own temples and tombs safe, may I alone be expelled as I now throw this stone." And saying these words, he threw a stone with his hands.

Another, purely Slavic interpretation can be found when Vladimir I of Kiev ratifies the treaty with the Bulgarians as attested in the *PVL s.a.* 6493 (985): "So Vladimir made

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19 See the ritual sacrifice of a heathen priest from the city of Wolin, strangled with a rope while being tied to a tree on an island by some merchants and sailors on a trade trip, as narrated by Herbord in his *Life of St. Otto of Bamberg* (see section "Travelling and trading" in this same chapter).

20 Dynda, "Rusalki," 88.

21 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 167–68.

22 Priest Bruno.

23 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 163.

24 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 179. See Chapter 4, "Military rituals during peace times".

peace with the Bulgars, and they confirmed it by oath. The Bulgars declared, 'May peace prevail between us till stone floats and straw sinks.' "[25]

In the preceding chapter on the fertility rites, we already mentioned Thietmar of Merseburg's testimony of a fertility god *Hennil*/*Bendil* among the West Slavs, who could also have a connection with oaths on the basis of a recent interpretation of the etymology of its variant name *Bendil* together with the Indo-European symbolism of the ring.[26]

In a similar way, oaths were made by the sun among Polish and Czech noblemen during the Middle Ages, though in Unbegaun's opinion this would be a custom of Germanic origin.[27] In contrast, we consider that Unbegaun was influenced by an ideological prejudice that goes back to the German scholars from the first half of the twentieth century, according to which Slavic paganism was the result of the influence of Germanic culture through the Frankish missionaries among the West Slavs, and the Nordic Varangians among the East Slavs. Unlike Unbegaun, we think that a thorough consideration and comparison of the sources regarding the different geographical areas could give us a global picture of similar phenomena in all of them, allowing us to suggest an original Slavic pre-Christian religion, with parallels in other Indo-European cultures. In the case of the oaths made by the sun, it is so if we compare the practice of the West Slavs as mentioned by Unbegaun with a rarely quoted testimony on the South Slavs, actually one of the oldest utterances made by a South Slavic military chief that has been recorded: the sixth-century account of the Byzantine historian Menander Protector (fr. 21)[28] of the answer given by the Sclavene chieftain Daurentius (or Dauritas) and his comrades to the Avar embassy sent to them in the year 578, asking the Slavs to accept Avar suzerainty and the payment of a tribute. According to Menander, Protector Daurentius' answer was the following:

> 21. Dauritas and his fellow chiefs replied, "What man has been born, what man is warmed by the rays of the sun who shall make our might his subject? Others do not conquer our land, we conquer theirs. And so it shall always be for us, as long as there are wars and weapons."[29]

We think that Daurentius' speech can be understood both as an invocation and as an oath made by the sun and the weapons. The latter will be discussed in the chapter dealing with military rituals.

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25 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 96.

26 Álvarez-Pedrosa, "¿Existió un dios eslavo Hennil?," 135–38.

27 Unbegaun, *La religion des anciens slaves*, 425.

28 Fr. 48 in the edition by Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, 252.

29 Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman,* 195.

Divination

In addition to oaths, Rappaport[30] listed other types of sanctified expressions, among them prophecies, auguries, divinations and oracles. All of these are well attested in every Slavic area. We have the oldest reference to divination practices associated to nature spirits among the Southern Slavs in Procopius of Caesarea's *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23): "They reverence, however, both rivers and nymphs and some other spirits, and they sacrifice to all these also, and they make their divinations in connection with these sacrifices."[31]

In Procopius' testimony, it is said that the Southern Slavs used to offer sacrifices to nature deities, called by him "rivers, nymphs and other spirits" using the corresponding Greek words, in exchange for their divinations. On the basis of his description, we could infer that it was a kind of augury practised on the bodies or blood of the sacrificial victims. There is no certainty about this, however.

Blood sacrifices connected with divination can be found more clearly among the West Slavs, as for instance in Helmold's *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 52),[32] when condemning the diverse religious cult given by the Western Slavs to their gods; this included the blood sacrifices of different animals (cows and sheep), as well as of "Christian men," whose blood was drunk by the priest in order to make his oracles more accurate, "for it is the opinion of many that it is easier to conjure the demons with blood."[33] After consuming the sacrifices, as was their custom according to Helmold, people would turn to banquets and amusements. Still another divination practice that is described in detail by Helmold:

> The Slavs, too, have a strange delusion. At their feasts and carousals they pass about a bowl over which they utter words—I should not say of consecration but of execration—in the name of the gods—of the good one, as well as of the bad one—professing that all propitious fortune is arranged by the good god, adverse, by the bad god. Hence, also, in their language they call the bad god Diabol, or *Zcerneboch*, that is, the Black God.[34]

We can observe here, therefore, the account of a curious technique for propitiating good and bad fortune, saying some words over a bowl in the name of a good god and of a bad god, who is called *Zcerneboch* in the Latin original and would correspond to Slavic Chernebog or Chernobog,[35] that is, "the Black God," as Helmold himself translates correctly. On the one hand, we have a dualist system between a god of good that is not named, and a god of evil associated to the colour black, that is identified with the Devil by the Christian chronicler. We could infer a Belobog (White God) too; therefore, though

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30 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 320.

31 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271.

32 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 107.

33 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 159.

34 Tschan, *The Chronicle of the Slavs by Helmold, Priest of Bosau*, 159.

35 For a comment on Chernobog as a chthonic god and the dualism in Slavic pantheon, see Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 79–83.

it is not attested anywhere in the oldest historical sources, being mentioned only in two late sixteenth-century German chronicles as *Belbuck* and *Bialbug*.[36] On the other hand, we have here one of those "factive" rituals as defined by Rappaport,[37] being those with the aim of "bringing into being the states of affairs with which they are concerned." In the following paragraph, Helmold refers to the god Sventovit of Arkona as the most powerful of the Slavic gods, one thought to be the most effective in his oracles. For this reason, according to Helmold, the god was offered the blood sacrifice of a Christian man chosen randomly once a year. On the fertility rituals of taking auguries associated to the god Sventovit of Arkona, we already mentioned the testimony of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* in Chapter 2 dealing with fertility rites. As for the military rites of taking auguries before battle with the sacred horse of the god, we will speak later in the following chapter. Moreover, Saxo Grammaticus (14.39.11.1–3)[38] gives a detailed account of other methods of divination practised by the Slavs of the island of Rügen, saying as follows:

> Also when they wanted to undertake other endeavors, they obtained omens regarding their intentions from the first animal they found; and if these omens were good, they would continue on, full of good spirits, but if, on the contrary, they were bad, they would turn around and go home, retracing their steps. They were also familiar with the practice of drawing lots; instead of the lots, they would put three little pieces of wood, black on one side and white on the other, into their laps, and the white parts meant favorable omens and the black parts, adverse omens. And not even women were indifferent to this type of science; since, sitting before the fire, without paying attention, they would draw random lines in the ash; and when they counted them, if they were even, they considered that an omen of success, and if they were uneven, they said that that was a portent of bad luck.[39]

We can observe here a similar dual system of good/bad omens associated to the black and white pieces of wood respectively that reminds us of the Black God of evil as mentioned by Helmold. Furthermore, as Ryan[40] already remarked, this could be the first mention among the Slavs of the Russian *zern'*. As well, the method of casting lots is to be found in Thietmar of Merseburg's *Chronicon* (VI, 24),[41] associated to the military rites of the inhabitants of the city of "Riedegost," which we will discuss later. Moreover, in the chapter dealing with fertility rites we already referred to the oracles that were taken and the corresponding sacrifices offered in the sacred lake of the city of Rethra, as narrated by Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (*Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg*) (II, 21).[42]

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36 Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 81–82.

37 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 115.

38 Holder, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, 567.29–40.

39 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 187–88.

40 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 321.

41 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 302.

42 Waitz, *Adami Gesta Hammaburgensis*, 54.

Coming back to the South Slavic sources, one of the earliest allusions to divination among the Slavs linked to the origins of the Slavic script appears at the beginning of the famous tenth-century treatise *On the Letters* written by a mysterious anonymous author bearing the pseudonym of Chernorizets Khrabr (The Brave Monk), where it states that "Earlier the Slavs did not have books but by strokes and notches read and divined, being heathen."[43] These *črьtami i rězami* (strokes and notches) could be understood as incisions made on pieces of wood employed to make predictions, in a similar way to the black and white pieces of wood that the Rugians drew as lots according to Saxo Grammaticus. In the view of Schenker,[44] in spite of the possibility that those "strokes and notches" could be interpreted as a Slavic version of the Germanic or Turkic runes, due to the historical contact of the Slavs with those cultures, no Slavic runes had been discovered until now. However, this could have changed very recently, for an archaeological finding made in the Czech Republic could confirm the existence of Slavic runes dating back to the seventh century carved on a cow bone that could have been used to divine.[45]

Regarding the "auguries taken from the first animal that they met" recounted by Saxo Grammaticus, this belief in omens based on casual encounters with animals is also well attested among the East Slavs. Actually, these omens belong to the most common and popular kind of auguries in many cultures, such as oneiromancy—the interpretation of premonitory dreams—or divination through the behaviour of different animals—mostly birds, called ornithomancy, and snakes, known as herpetomancy. But there are also more uncommon omens, like those obtained by the interpretation of chance meetings with different animals or persons, of sneezing and of wall cracks. For instance, oneiromancy is condemned twice in the *Izbornik* of 1076 in the following passages:

> 313ah–313ai: You must not practise divination, nor believe in dreams, nor make auguries, nor turn to devilish teachings, for all these are punished by Law.
>
> 523–525: A person without any understanding has false and vain hopes, and dreams encourage fools. Divinations and auguries and dreams are nonsense, for dreams have deceived many people, and those who have placed their hopes in them have failed. As with those who strives to catch a shadow or chase the wind, so those who believe in dreams.

Moreover, it has an old parallel in the dream of Svyatoslav Vsevolodich, as it is recounted in the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*, the oldest East Slavic epic poem that dates back to the end of the twelfth century:

> 93–102: The ramparts of the cities were hushed and mirth declined. And Svyatoslav dreamed a troubled dream at Kiev on the hills. "This night," he said, "from even-time, ye dressed me with a black coverlet on my bed of yew; [men] poured me out blue wine mixed with dust; they scattered great [treasure of] pearls from the empty quivers of the

43 Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 173.

44 Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 173–74.

45 Macháček et al. "Runes from Lány (Czech Republic)—The Oldest Inscription among Slavs. A New Standard for Multidisciplinary Analysis of Runic Bones," 105333.

> nomads on to my lap and [try to] soothe me. Already are the boards in my golden-roofed abode bereft of wall-plates. All night long from even-time have the crows of Bus [or Blus] croaked; two captives [stand] by the fen: mercilessly [the foe] have carried the two to the landing-stage of the river, down to the blue sea." And the Boyars answered the Prince; "Already, Prince, has grief taken captive our mind. For two hawks have flown away from their sires' golden throne, to seek the city of Tmutorokań, or, may be, to quaff in their helms of the Don. Already are the wings of the two hawks by the sabres of the heathen made to walk afoot; and, [Igor] himself they have fettered in fetters of iron."[46]

This excerpt also contains two references to ornithomancy: the crow-cawing during the whole night and the flight of the two hawks. Actually, these are the two main actions in which this divinatory technique consists: the interpretation of the song and of the movements and flights of birds. Both the belief in birdsong and in dreams can be found also in a thirteenth-century sermon attributed to Saint John Chrysostom that is contained in a medieval Russian compilation called *Izmaragd*.[47]

Furthermore, ornithomancy is condemned in the *Sanctifying Instruction for a Newly-Ordained Priest*, together with gambling with dice and chess and watching horse competitions. In this thirteenth-century work of canon law, included in later Russian versions of the Byzantine *Nomokanon* known as the *Kormchaia kniga*, the following can be read:

> Do not read prohibited texts; what have you learned until now? Hateful words, enchantments and cures by witchcraft, prophecies from the flight of birds or games, to tell wonderful tales by charlatans; you must renounce your sets of dice and chess, do not watch horse races.[48]

Again, in the *Three Sanctifying Instructions for the Clergy and Lay Persons on Various Matters of Ecclesiastical Discipline*, dating back to the fifteenth century, ornithomancy continues to be condemned together with chance meetings and herpetomancy.[49] A longer description of ornithomancy can be found in the *Sermon of the Holy Father Cyril, Archbishop of Cyprus, on Evil Souls*, an East Slavic text of probable South Slavic origin that dates back to the period between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries:

> And we, being as we say true Christians, believe in these same demons, as well as sorcerers and soothsayers, and we hold it in the highest esteem, by believing in birds, in woodpeckers, crows and magpies. When we want to go somewhere, if one should sing, we stand listening to see whether, in our opinion, it sings on our right or on our left. Then we say to ourselves [fol. 233r.] that the bird is a good omen, and favours us in its blaspheming, for has not God shown good to the bird so that it can tell us? Or when something bad happens to us on the road, then we start saying to our *druzhina*.[50]

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46 Magnus, *The Tale of the Armament of Igor*,12.

47 *Troitsk. Lavr*. no. 202, chap. 59.

48 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 354.

49 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 413.

50 Retinue or personal guard that accompanied the princes in Kievan Rus'.

> Why didn't we turn round, otherwise the bird would not have let us go in vain and we did not listen to it?[51]

It mentions three types of birds, woodpeckers, crows and tits or chickadees, whose song could be interpreted both as a good and a bad omen depending on the direction from which it comes when going out: from the right or from the left respectively. This text condemns the belief in ill-omened chance meetings and sneezing, both of which had been mentioned earlier in the entry for the year 1068 in the *PVL*, where the chronicler was showing the recent defeat of the Rus'ian princes by the nomad Polovtsians as a result of their sins, among which could be counted the following:

> Do we not live like pagans as long as we attach superstitious significance to meetings? For he turns back who meets a monk, a boar or a swine. Is that not pagan? It is part and parcel of the devil's teaching to retain such delusions. Other people attach special significance to sneezing, which is healthy for the head.[52]

As Ryan[53] already pointed out, the belief in the unlucky nature of those kinds of omens such as chance meetings with monks or pigs was widespread throughout all medieval Europe. And here they are condemned explicitly as pagan customs. The practices of those omens were codified in books, some of which are mentioned by later East Slavonic sources like, for instance, the index of forbidden books by the Russian metropolitan Zosima (1490–1494) and the *Stoglav* (1551). That was the case of the *Voronograi*, the book of divination from crow-cawing.

Furthermore, in his account, metropolitan Zosima refers to several other books of omens, which he considers heretical: the *Myshepisk*, the book of divination from the noise of mice; the *Stenoshchelk*, the book of divination from wall cracks; the *Gromovnik*, from the Greek *Brontologion*, the book of divination from thunder and lightning; and the *Koliadnik*, coming from the Greek *Kalendologion*, the book of divination based on the day of the week on which Christmas or the New Year falls. Actually, the Greek *Kalendologion* comes from the Latin *calendae*, the word that was borrowed in Slavic as *Koliada*, that is, the period between Christmas and Epiphany that includes New Year's Eve. Among the Eastern Slavs, it was believed to be one of the most magical periods of the year and it was a custom in several Slavic countries to take omens every night, especially on those between New Year's Eve and Epiphany. The *Koliadnik* is a compilation of these predictions arranged by the different days of these holidays, called also *sviatki*. The *Koliadnik* has come down to us both in South Slavic (Bulgarian and Serbian) and East Slavic (Russian) copies, dating back to the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries respectively. According to Ryan,[54] in spite of the variations that they show in

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51 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 368.

52 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 147.

53 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 124.

54 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 380.

their contents and wording, all of them probably come from Byzantine Greek versions, at least, as regards the written tradition.

However, there were other ritual practices belonging to popular divination that have been attested by Russian literary works from the nineteenth century, such as Aleksandr Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Vasily Zhukovskii's *Svetlana*, or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, practices which have also been registered by ethnographers and folklorists.[55] Those practices of fortune telling were made by young girls during the Christmas holidays or *sviatki*, and their main purpose was to ascertain marriage prospects. With the aim of knowing the name of their future spouse, girls employed different methods, as for instance invoking the image of the future husband in front of a mirror holding a candle, or pouring wax, tin, lead or egg white into water and interpreting the shapes formed. Sometimes, they even used chickens or cockerels, that is, *alectryomancy* (chicken oracle), in order to make predictions depending on the object or the direction that they chose when pecking at grain that the observer had scattered on the floor. We have seen already the relationship between cockerels and chickens both as regards fertility rites and the cult of the dead, whose spirits were thought to dwell in or enter the world of the living through the bathhouse. It was at the bathhouse at midnight that all those divination practices were made, especially on St. Basil's Eve, that is, New Year's Eve, this date being considered to be of particular significance in order to contact the spirits or "demons."[56] It is interesting if we compare them with the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b),[57] where we can read the following:

> (144) Some melt lead and they mix it with water, to tell the future with it, and they tie it to the neck of children and sick people to chase away terrors. Foolish, they believe that [...] Others melt wax with water, and by the resulting shape, with hollow belief, they foretell astonishing things of the living or of those who must die, without realizing that because of the difference in the qualities and unevenness in the material and the form, different figures arise, which are given shape by art or nature, and these are natural things.[58]

Therefore, we observe the same methods of divination among the Poles dealing with people's life and death. The belief in destiny and genealogy is mentioned in chapter 93 of the sixteenth-century *Stoglav*, within a comment on rule number 61 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council.[59] It follows the twelfth-century Old Russian translation of the *Pandects* of Nikon Chernogorets, both in the magical practices condemned (the visits to magicians and fortune tellers, the taming of bears for pagan festivals, and the beliefs in destiny determined by birth or genealogy, and in the so-called cloud-chasers),[60] as well as in the punishment that must be inflicted on them: six years of excommunication.

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55 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 96–114.

56 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 45–46.

57 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 69–76.

58 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 237–38.

59 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 21.

60 For the English translation of a parallel fragment belonging to the contemporary sixteenth-century household guidance manual the *Domostroi*, see Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 40.

But two differences may be noticed: first, the later Muscovite text translates as "quack doctors" what in the original work appeared with the enigmatic word *centurion*, and it also added a Slavic equivalent in order to explain the Greek technique of divination through *Rozhdanitsa* (Genealogy): being derived this word from *rozhdenie* (birth).

In addition to this technique of divination based on date of birth, the East Slavs also practised the rites of divination that were carried out on the first days of every month, or *calendae* in Latin, as attested in the comment on rule 62 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, contained in the same chapter. Moreover, in question 17 of chapter 41 of the *Stoglav*, divination through the observation of the stars and the planets (astrology) and of good and bad days and hours is referred to.[61] Likewise, belief in the date of birth, in the "reading of the stars" as well as in days and years appears in the aforementioned thirteenth-century sermon attributed to Saint John Chrysostom.[62] Likewise, the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (146) mention different kinds of fortune tellers, haruspices and augurs, who observed the auspicious days and hours in order to perform different actions, such as closing a deal or agreeing a marriage.[63]

As a conclusion, we can say that, though the written tradition of divination books could have been taken from the Greek Byzantine sources, the popular divination practised especially during the Christmastide was originally Slavic, and shared both by East and West Slavs.

Travelling and Trading

Closely related to divination are the rites destined to propitiate a safe trip or a good deal or business, for most of them entail the act of taking auguries or offering sacrifices. One of the earliest examples of this can be found in the testimony of the tenth-century Arab traveller Ibn Faḍlān, when speaking of the Rus' merchants that he met at the confluence of the Volga and Kama Rivers:

> The moment their boats reach this dock every one of them disembarks, carrying bread, meat, onions, milk and alcohol (*nabīdh*), and goes to a tall piece of wood set up [in the ground]. This piece of wood has a face like the face of a man and is surrounded by small figurines behind which are long pieces of wood set up in the ground. [When] he reaches the large figure, he prostrates himself before it and says, "Lord, I have come from a distant land, bringing so many slave-girls [priced at] such and such per head and so many sables [priced at] such and such per pelt." He continues until he has mentioned all of the merchandise he has brought with him, then says, "And I have brought this offering," leaving what he has brought with him in front of the piece of wood, saying, "I wish you to provide me with a merchant who has many dīnārs and dirhams and who will buy from me whatever I want [to sell] without haggling over the price I fix." Then he departs. If he has difficulty in selling [his goods] and he has to remain too many days, he returns with a second and third offering. If his wishes prove to be impossible he brings an offering

61 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 19–20.

62 *Troitsk. Lavr*. no. 202, chap. 59.

63 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 240.

> to every single one of those figurines and seeks its intercession, saying, "These are the wives, daughters and sons of our Lord." He goes up to each figurine in turn and questions it, begging its intercession and grovelling before it. Sometimes business is good and he makes a quick sell, at which point he will say, "My Lord has satisfied my request, so I am required to recompense him." He procures a number of sheep or cows and slaughters them, donating a portion of the meat to charity and taking the rest and casting it before the large piece of wood and the small ones around it. He ties the heads of the cows or the sheep to that piece of wood set up in the ground. At night, the dogs come and eat it all, but the man who has done all this will say, "My Lord is pleased with me and has eaten my offering."[64]

Here we can see the offering of sacrifices (of sheep and cows) before and after a business transaction has been done, as a propitiatory victim and as a sacrifice of thanksgiving respectively. In a similar way, there is a famous example of a contemporary sacrifice of thanksgiving for a safe trip that is described in the tenth-century Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Administrando Imperio*, which describes the curious rite that the Rus' merchants and warriors used to performed after having traversed the rapids of the river Dnieper on their way to the Black Sea and Constantinople:

> After traversing this place,[65] they reach the island called St. Gregory,[66] on which island they perform their sacrifices because a gigantic oak-tree stands there; and they sacrifice live cocks. Arrows, too, they peg in round about, and others bread and meat, or something of whatever each may have, as is their custom. They also throw lots regarding the cocks, whether to slaughter them, or to eat them as well, or to leave them alive.[67]

Among the West Slavs it is attested in the twelfth-century Helmold's *Chronica Slavorum* (I, 6) the compulsory offering that was imposed on foreign merchants, who had to offer a portion of the most valuable part of their merchandise to the god Sventovit of Arkona on the island or Rügen, if they wanted to trade with its inhabitants, the Rugiani or Rani.[68] Even the request of a human sacrifice is reported after a satisfactory fishing expedition and trade made in November a few years before Helmold wrote his chronicle (II, 108), when the foreign merchants who had come to the island of Rügen on account of the herring are said to have been asked to pay a tribute to the god Sventovit that consisted of the life of a Christian priest.[69] Helmold tells how they refused to pay the tribute and managed to escape with the priest safe and sound during the night. Moreover, in the *Dialogue on the Life of St. Otto of Bamberg* (III, 24),[70] written by the monk Herbord in the

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64 Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 9–11.

65 The ford of *Vrar* on the river Dnieper.

66 The modern island of Khortytsia, belonging to the city of Zaporizhia (Ukraine).

67 For the English translation, see Moravcsik and Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De Administrando Imperio*, vol. 1, 61. For a commentary on the passage, see Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De Administrando Imperio*, vol. 2, 54–56.

68 Tschan, *The Chronicle of the Slavs by Helmold, Priest of Bosau*, 61.

69 Tschan, *The Chronicle of the Slavs by Helmold, Priest of Bosau*, 276.

70 Köpke, *Herbordi Dialogus*, 139.

twelfth century, the description of the murder of a heathen priest from the city of Wolin, one of the fierce enemies of St. Otto, who was strangled with a rope while being tied to a tree on an island by some merchants and sailors on a trade trip, could be interpreted as a ritual human sacrifice made by the latter to ensure successful trade and a safe journey, rather than as a divine punishment as it was understood by Herbord.[71]

Healing

"Illness is the irregularity which disrupts the regularity of daily life. It is the disorder of being in the very circumstances of life's existence, and strikes without warning. This is how Sinhalese understand the demonic."[72]

Likewise, the Slavs conceived illness as a chaotic anomaly that could be regularized, restoring the natural order of health by employing the proper ritual. They even personified disease in different evil creatures, such as the demon called *Triasca*,[73] which is mentioned in the East Slavic *Sermon of the Holy Father Moses on blasphemy and oaths*, written in the context of the twelfth-century Novgorodian Church. It says as follows:

> Similarly and other like misdeeds: making sacrifices to demons, curing illness with charms and knotted cords,[74] and believing they expel the weak demon called *Trjasca* with certain false writings, by inscribing the names of accursed Hellene demons on apples and putting [them] on the holy altar during the liturgy and then terrify themselves with fear of confrontation by angels; […] But we continue to do the same, and adhere to the sins that the Lord God prohibits largely through his saints, and does not allow disease to be cured by charms, nor knotted cords, nor by seeking demons, […][75]

This would be one of the oldest mentions of *Triasca*, one of the female demons of fever that is to be found among the so-called *Triasavitsy* (shaking fevers), personified in the figure of the 12 daughters of Herod in the East Slavic folk religion, as has already been studied by Ryan.[76] In popular legends, spells[77] or prayers against fevers were associated with King David, St. Tikhon, St. Pafnutii or St. Sisinnius, whose name was invoked and written in amulets in order to fight the fevers, as in some amulets found among the Novgorodian birchbark letters.[78] Those spells could be both prophylactic and curative.

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71 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 146.

72 Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*, 235.

73 From the Church Slavonic verb *triasti* (to shake): Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 248.

74 *Nauzy* in the Church Slavonic original. This seems to be a special type of talisman, a knotted cord worn round the neck or on the wrist to ward off sickness and evil spirits.

75 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 342.

76 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 244–50.

77 For East Slavic spells or *zagovory* against fevers, see Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 172–73; Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 49.

78 Casas Olea, "San Sisinio y Sichael: los amuletos en corteza de abedul como fuente sobre la magia bizantinoeslava," 273–84.

As it is reported by Ryan,[79] the Slavonic version of the story of St. Sisinnius appeared already in an eleventh-century Glagolitic prayer book or *Euchologion* that was later condemned in a fourteenth-century Russian list of forbidden books, because of both its pagan and Bogomil[80] elements.

In the former excerpt, three methods are described for curing fevers: making sacrifices, saying charms and wearing *nauzy* (knotted cords) in East Church Slavonic. Moreover, it is described how the East Slavs wrote down the names of "Hellene demons," that is, "heathen gods," on apples, putting them on the altar of the church during the liturgy. Similar techniques can be found in the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b), where the following list of popular remedies for different illnesses is included:

> (144) Some heal tooth pain by writing certain words and (145) symbols with clay or in other ways, or some who by nailing a nail into a stick they believe they heal, when they are making people sick, and believe that they can offer a medicine while they are plaguing souls. Some, to heal certain headaches that are called *vrzeczyene*,[81] lick with their tongue the forehead of he who suffers from the illness, adding some words. There are many who seem to heal different fevers, some *inub'o*,[82] and others with different words and acts, whenever they hear someone is suffering from them. Some write certain things on a piece of fruit or on wafers and give it to the sick person, others on a piece of papyrus, others do not allow fevers to be named in their presence, but allow many other evil and sordid things; the faith of all of these individuals is hollow, for they seek medicine that comes from an apostate, not from the wisdom of God. […] There are some who say that they cure a disease that they call *myara*[83] by measuring a man or his head with a thread, and they say that it happens with this disease and others that resemble it, when however they disregard other things that they do not know: this error is completely ridiculous, as the body's illness is not expelled with a thread, but rather with true things and remedies. […] Others attempt to cure the diseases called *nogecz*[84] or *vrasz*[85] with hollow words that are full of trickery, saying that God had given them this virtue of words, but these wretched individuals do not know to whom, as, what saint has taught them this, if not the maker and master of the thousand tricks? I recognize that the Sunday prayer or the Annunciation to the Virgin can be said as a symbol, whenever providing and giving to someone a medicine; however, this should be done with care, so that there is no occasion for superstition.[86]

Among them, the custom of writing certain words on some fruits or on wafers and giving them to the sick persons in order to heal fevers reminds us very much of the method of writing the names of heathen gods on apples and "consecrating" them during the

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79 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 246.

80 Bogomilism was a dualist heresy that emerged in the Balkans between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, and which takes its name from the legendary Bulgarian priest Bogomil.

81 This word means "fever," not "headache."

82 The term *inub'o* does not seem to be Slavic, cfr. perhaps the Latin *inūber* (skinny).

83 Cf. Polish *miara* (measurement).

84 "Foot pain."

85 Possibly a type of fever.

86 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 238–39.

mass that was attested in the East Slavic *Sermon of the Holy Father Moses on Blasphemy and Oaths*. Likewise, in question 11 of Chapter 5 of the *Stoglav*, the practice of writing a name spell on the communion bread to protect the health of the named person is condemned.[87] In addition to this, the remedy of curing some illnesses by measuring a man with a thread is very similar to the practice mentioned in the fourteenth-century *Sermon by the Holy Father Cyril, Archbishop of Cyprus, on Evil Souls* (fol. 234v.), according to which old women were called to heal children by tying knotted cords to them and taking measures everywhere:

> They use knotted cords to deceive many of the faithful. [The woman] starts by tying children with knots,[88] taking measures around all sides while spitting on the ground saying that she is cursing the devil, and that invokes him even more, [saying that] she is doing it to cure the children, but she is taking the father and mother to the abyss of hell, with their souls going into eternal torment.[89]

In another East Slavic text, the *Three Sanctifying Instructions for the Clergy and Lay Persons on Various Matters of Ecclesiastical Discipline*, the quack doctor who made those knotted cords was called *uzolnik*.[90]

Therefore, very similar healing methods were found among both the East and West Slavs. Regarding the South Slavs, we have a few references to remedies associated with pre-Christian rites. For instance, in answer 79 of the *Responsa Nicolai ad consulta Bulgarorum*,[91] Pope Nicholas I condemned the custom among the Bulgarians of making the sick wear a binding around their neck in order to be cured,[92] which coincides with the *nauzy* (knotted cords) of the East Slavs. In addition, in the same work, answer 62 mentions the belief in healing through a stone that was found in Bulgaria.[93] Finally, chapter 13 of the fourteenth-century *Life of St. Theodosius of Tărnovo*, written by Patriarch Callistus of Constantinople, relates how a mysterious monk from Constantinople called Theodoretus induced the inhabitants of Tărnovo, in Bulgaria, to worship an oak tree, from which they believed to obtain healing by offering to it the sacrifice of sheep and lambs.[94] He could have here a specific allusion to the offering of sacrifices to be cured, as

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87 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 19, 171.

88 We have translated the word *nauz'* as "knot" and "knotted cord" unlike Ryan, who prefers to use "amulet." Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 222. Nevertheless, he acknowledges in a note that it is the equivalent of the Latin term *ligatura*, a magical technique consisting in tying knots. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 256n40.

89 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 370.

90 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 413n388.

91 The answers of Pope Nicholas I to the Bulgarian prince Boris I on the teachings and the discipline of the church, that were sent in a letter in 866.

92 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 59.

93 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 58.

94 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 254–55.

was mentioned in an abstract way in the East Slavic *Sermon of the Holy Father Moses on Blasphemy and Oaths*.

Finally, according to Ryan,[95] blood sacrifices could be required during the extremely interesting rite of *opakhivanie* or *opashka* that was practised in central and southern Russian provinces in order to protect a village from a plague or epidemic by ploughing round the place.[96] Unfortunately, we can find no written allusions to this in the earliest sources.

95 Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 171–72.

96 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 15, 48–49, 110.

Chapter 4

MILITARY RITUALS

WE HAVE SEVERAL testimonies about the military rituals practised among the pre-Christian Slavs. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, the Slavs inherit the Indo-European tradition of military expansion; on the other, from the ninth century onwards, the West Slavs in particular suffer intense military pressure from the surrounding Christian powers, resulting in greater emphasis on the militarization of their way of life, which includes all aspects of their religious life. It has been emphasized that many divinities that were originally transfunctional or belonged to areas not strictly military are "militarized" in this period.[1]

The primary function of military rituals is the cohesion of the population to which they are addressed. This entails designing a series of ritual gestures of a religious nature with the intention of promoting the success of the military campaign to be launched, giving confidence to the combatants, or ensuring that the return of the army to civilian life will not involve any kind of ritual pollution or impurity.[2]

Rituals before Combat

In general, pre-war preparation involves some kind of preparatory ritual like rites of passage, which allow those enlisted for combat to realize that they are leaving behind their civilian role to focus solely on their military duties; military vows or consecration of the troops would be part of this group.

One of the oldest testimonies we have about the pre-Christian Slavic religion tells us about these military vows: Procopius of Caesarea was born at the end of the fifth century and died in the middle of the sixth. After becoming a rector, in 527 he became secretary and legal adviser (*adsessor*) of Belisarius, the general of Emperor Justinian, with whom he participated in the wars against the Persians, the vandals and the Ostrogoths. This provided him with first-hand information about the events, which he used to write a masterpiece, *De bello Gothico*, in eight books, which constitutes the key historical source of the knowledge of his time. Procopius of Caesarea's *De bello Gothico* 3.14.22–30[3] tells us how to try to ward off fear of death in combat by means of a vow, which entails a substitutionary sacrifice in which "the victim offered in the sacrifice dies, but not me": "When death is on their heels, whether they get sick or are getting ready for war, they promise that if they survive, they will immediately make a sacrifice to God in

1 Campanile, "La religione degli Slavi e dei Balti," 595.

2 Pritchett, *The Greek State at War*, 109–117.

3 Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 2.

exchange for their life and, once they are free, they sacrifice whatever they have at hand and believe they have bought their salvation through that sacrifice."[4]

Simultaneously, preparatory rituals must build a cohesive society, so military oracles will assume great importance. This is possibly the ritual aspect we know best about West Slavs, probably because Christian chroniclers were impressed by its strong predictive content, which they logically could not have.

Obtaining oracles and divine rituals before going to war is very well evidenced in the texts that inform us about pre-Christian Slavic religion. We learn about rituals of a cohesive nature in which combatants are assured about the battle through general guessing like "will the military expedition succeed? Yes/No," or "what are the best dates to go to battle?"

The oldest text referring to these practices can be found in question 35 of the *Responses of Pope Nicholas I to the Questions of the Bulgars*,[5] which is a key to understanding the Christianization of Bulgaria in the ninth century and how difficult it was for followers of a highly ritualized pre-Christian Slavic religion to understand Christianity:

> You have told us what you used to do when you went to battle, like the augural observation of days and hours, the enchantments, the festivities, the songs and the auguries. And you want to be instructed on what you have to do from now on: we will tell you what we need, unless we also see that you are divinely inspired. […] The things you celebrated, that is, the augural observation of days and hours, the enchantments, the festivities, the wicked songs and the auguries are pretentious and the work of the devil.[6]

The oracles can be specifically oriented towards the marching of the army or predict a war scenario to prepare the population for what is to come. Although we study it in detail in the chapter on fertility rituals, we must remember that the oracular lake of Glomuzi, which Thietmar of Merseburg mentions in his *Chronicon* 1.3, predicted not only situations of prosperity but also the time of war, full of blood and ash:

> Glomuzi is a fountain located no more than two miles from the Elbe that forms a lake[7] where miracles often take place, which is true according to the local inhabitants and is proven by the eyes of many. When there is going to be peace for the locals and the earth does not lie about its fruits, the place fills up with wheat, oats and acorns and gladdens the spirits of the residents who often gather there. But when the cruel time of war ensues, it anticipates the true indication of the future outcome with blood and ash.[8]

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4 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 23–24.

5 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Las respuestas del Papa Nicolás I a las consultas de los búlgaros*.

6 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 56.

7 Poltzcher Lake.

8 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 68–69.

Thietmar *Chronicon* 6.24. refers to another oracular lake, where the temple of Riedegost was located, one of the most important for the Slavs according to Słupecki,[9] where a wild boar appeared when a new period of war was announced:

> Since ancient times, a different error has been transmitted, stating that when the cruel misfortune of a confrontation threatens them, a large wild boar with white fangs shines through the foam of this lake, rolling in the dust and appearing terribly agitated.[10]

The oracle that predicts the success of a more widespread military enterprise among the Slavs is emitted through the behaviour of a horse devoted to divinity. We will look at this same type of oracle to confirm the votive offerings made after the battle at the temple of Riedegost, according to Thietmar's testimony, but a prognosis to predict the success or failure of a military campaign is very well described for the temple of Szczecin, as one of St. Otto's biographers, Herbord, tells us in detail in *Dialogue on the Life of St. Otto of Bamberg*[11] 33:

> Because they had a large shiny black and very fiery horse. Throughout the year he would lounge around and was considered to be such a sacred character that no rider was allowed to ride him and he was diligently guarded by one of the four priests of the temple. Thus, when they thought about launching a land campaign against the enemies, or looting, they would determine the future of the company through this in the following way: nine lances were placed on the ground, alternately separated by the space of one elbow. Thus, after the priest responsible for the horse would saddle him and lead him three times by the bridle alone through the spears on the ground. And if the horse moved without stumbling or stepping on the spears, they would continue with the venture as they saw this as a sign of prosperity and safety. Otherwise, they would abandon [the venture]. In short, this type of prophecy and other calculations made with wood, which were used to examine auguries in case of naval combat or piracy, although closely observed by some, was totally eliminated [by St. Otto] with the help of God.[12]

The ability of horses to predict the future of a military company is witnessed in other Indo-European cultures. The best known case is that of Xanthos, Achilles' horse that predicts his tragic destiny in *Il.* 19.405–418. Among the Germans, the oracular capacity of the sacred white horses, not mounted by any human being, is described very well by Tacitus, *Germania* 10, who claims that the Germans considered the sacred horses to be confidants of the gods.

The oracular horses of the Slavs were mounted only by the divinity,[13] in this case by the god Triglav, as we are told by the third biographer of St. Otto, the Anonymous Monk of Prüfening, *Life of St. Otto, Bishop of Bamberg*[14] 2.11 and were subject to a taboo against tampering. Other Indo-European traditions in which gods ride horses are related in West.[15]

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9 Słupecki, *Slavonic Pagan Sanctuaries*, 51–69.

10 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 72–73.

11 Köpke, *Herbordi Dialogus*.

12 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 138.

13 Dumézil offers parallels to this belief that God rode the sacred horse. Dumézil, *Le problème des centaures: Étude de mythologie comparée indoeuropéenne*, 34–36; 155–93.

14 Köpke, "Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis," 883–903.

15 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 152.

Szczecin's horse is black, while Arkona's sacred horse, which serves the same purpose, is white, like the clothes of the priests who took care of him. The oracular capacity of the Arkona temple for military affairs is already announced by Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum* 1.36.

Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*[16] 39.2–13 tells us in detail the ritual of obtaining auguries that was performed in the temple of Arkona before the battle:

> In addition to this, he owned his own white horse; cutting the hairs on its mane or tail was considered a bad omen. Only a single priest was allowed to feed and mount it, so that the use of the divine animal would not be considered less valuable if it were mounted more frequently. According to Rügen, it was believed that this was the horse used by Sventovit—this was the name of the idol—to wage a war against the enemies of his cults. The most important argument in support of this was that, when he was to remain in the stable all night, he would often appear in the morning covered in sweat and mud, as if he was returning from a long ride. Through this same horse, auguries were also obtained in this way: when they felt it was a good time to start a war against a region, the servants placed a triple row of spears in front of the sanctuary. Every two spears, united in a cross, would have their tips driven into the ground in any of these rows to divide them into spaces of equal dimensions. When the time had come to begin the expedition, the priest gave a solemn prayer, brought the harnessed horse before them from the porch and, if it were to cross all the rows in front of it with the right foot before the left foot, this would be seen as a good omen of war; if, on the contrary, it were to use its left foot before its right even once, the decision to take the region would change, and no navigation would be considered safe before seeing three tracks followed by favourable steps.[17]

In the first book of his *Chronica Bohemorum*,[18] written between 1119 and 1125, Cosmas of Prague left us a description of the mythical origins of the kingdom of Bohemia strongly influenced by classical sources. In that sense, critics have long debated the reliability of Cosmas' oral sources or their eminently literary character.[19] In the context of his narration of the struggle between bohemians and fighters, whose aim is to be a parallel to the fighting between Trojans and Latins of Virgil's *Aeneid*, he describes an oracle before the campaign and a ritual sacrifice of an ass of doubtful historicity. This is how it is narrated by Cosmas of Prague in *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.11:

> But as it always happens, unfaithful men have a tendency towards evil, when strength and good offices are lacking, to the point that they are oriented towards the worst possibilities of depravity. These people were inevitably devoted to pagan cults, in addition to being credible to liars, in despair of their strength and their soldiers' weapons, so they turn to a fortune teller, consult her and beg her to tell them what needs to be done in such a crisis or what events the future of the war will hold. Since she was full of divinatory ability, she did not keep them long in the ambiguous uncertainty of words; she said: "If you want to win the battle, you must first follow the command of the gods. Therefore,

16 Christiansen, *Saxo Grammaticus Books X–XVI*: vol. 1.

17 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 187.

18 Bretholz, *Die Chronik der Böhmen des Cosmas von Prag*.

19 de Lazero, "The Dynastic Myth of the Přemyslids in the *Chronica Bohemorum* by Cosmas of Prague," 129–38.

> sacrifice an ass to your gods so that they become your allies. Jupiter, the most important god, Mars himself, his sister Bellona and Ceres' son-in-law[20] want this offering made." A miserable ass is immediately sought, killed and, as ordered, divided up into thousands of pieces and, before you know it, the whole army eats it. Cheered up from eating the ass—something similar to a prodigy!—you could then see happy battalions and men willing to die like wild boars.[21]

The practice of consulting oracles before combat prevails even after Christianization. A very interesting text preserved in the *Cronicon Montis Sereni*, for the Latin name of Lauterberg, which narrates events between the date of the founding of the Augustinian monastery of Petersberg in 1124 and that of 1209, tells us in an entry made in 1209 that the Duke of the Poles, Władysław III Spindleshanks (1202–1206, 1227–1228) had: "a fortune teller who drew water from the river with a sieve and did not drain it, so they say, and carrying that water, preceded the army, which was a sign that promised them a victory."[22]

The divine capacity of women is based on the wonder of drawing water with a sieve, which is impossible, but confirms, as in other historical moments of the different processes of Christianization, that the survival of the pre-Christian religion is preserved through minor ritualized gestures and privileged by the female population, away from power, or by the lower classes. Despite this, the first thing that the Margrave Conrad II of Landsberg (1159–1210) does after defeating the Poles is kill the fortune teller.

The method of divination of the fortune teller reminds the legend of the Vestal Virgin Tuccia: when she was accused of the *crimen incesti* (incest crime), she asked to prove her innocence by the ordeal of carrying water from the river Tiber to the temple of Vesta using a sieve without draining a single drop.[23] The bronze sieve was a ritual object that had the purpose of carrying the sacred fire of Vesta. This legend appeared as connected with the myth of the Danaids, who were punished to the afterlife torment of carrying water in a sieve for eternity.[24] However, the Danaids, unlike the Vestal Tuccia or the Slavic fortune teller, were not successful in their task and their punishment was linked to other torments in the Greek Hades in which the effort has never a reward, as for example the well-known punishment of Sisyphos.

The connection between the myth of Tuccia and the method of divination of the Slavic fortune teller seems to be the success in an impossible task, in this case to carry water in a leaky recipient, and that would be the irrefutable evidence of something: either the victory in a military campaign or the innocence of a serious crime. In their turn, the continuous failure of the Danaids is related to other ritual manifestations of failure as

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20 Pluto.

21 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 98.

22 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 211.

23 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 28.3; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* 8.1.5.11; Dionysus of Halicarnase, *Ant. Rom.* 2.69.1.

24 Hyginus, *Fabulae* 168.

embedded into the same symbol: Pausanias[25] tells that there existed in Delphi a painting of Polygnotus of Thasos which represented women carrying broken jars and symbolized women without having received the initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries.

Rituals during Combat

The armies needed to march under some kind of protective ritual that gave them confidence. The oldest testimony we find of a military idol is in Response 33 of the *Responses of Pope Nicholas I to the Consultations of the Bulgars*, where we are informed of the existence of a sacred military emblem consisting of a horsetail. Whether the origin of this emblem is Proto-Bulgarian (not Indo-European) or not, it does not affect the whole of this study, because at the time when Pope Nicholas I wrote to Prince Boris-Mikhail I of Bulgaria, the Slavicization of the Bulgarians was practically complete. The horsetail was a sacred symbol of protection for the Bulgarians, as shown by the fact that the pope proposes the cross to replace it: "You said that when you used to go to battle you would carry the horsetail as a military emblem, and still do, and ask what you take with you instead. What better than the sign of the Holy Cross?"[26]

The existence of sacred banners is also confirmed by a later testimony, the letter that St. Bruno of Querfurt sent to Emperor Henry II in 1008 to ask the king to break his alliance with the pagan Lutici, make peace with Duke Bolesław I of Poland and return to an active policy of support for missionary work before the Slavs: "What common front do the Sacred Spear and the diabolical standards, which feed on human blood, have in common?"[27]

The Sacred Spear is one of the relics that was believed to be the authentic spear of Longinus that, according to John 19, 34, pierced Christ's side on the cross; by this time it had become a symbol of Germanic royalty. It is currently kept in the Schatzkammer in Vienna; in medieval times a nail from Christ's crucifix was attached. Bruno of Querfurt's comparison between this sacred symbol and the standards of the pagan Slavs allows us to assume the existence of sacred banners that ritually accompanied the Slavs in campaign.

The sacred banners were kept in the temple, as we were informed by Thietmar of Merseburg *Chronicon* 6.23, in the temple of Riedegost: "The banners of all of them [the pagan gods] are never moved from there, unless they are needed for a military campaign and even so only by foot soldiers."[28]

The banners are the symbol of the gods that precede the people in arms, according to the same source, Thietmar, *Chronicon* 6.22, when he recounts how Henry II became an

25 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.31.9.

26 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 56.

27 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 66.

28 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 72.

ally of the Lutici, which joined the imperial army in 1005: "After this, the Lutici joined us the day before they reached the Oder River, following their gods that preceded them."[29]

The military divinities of the banners could be female, according to the details Thietmar gave us in *Chronicon* 7.64, in the context of the campaigns between Bolesław I of Poland and Emperor Henry II in 1017. The Lutici, allies of the emperor, suffered a defeat that is accompanied by a sacrilege of one of their sacred banners:

> But when the Lutici returned, they were angry and looking to provide reparation to their goddess. Since the latter, represented on their banners, had been pierced by a stone thrown by a vassal of Marquis Hermann; when his assistants regretfully told the emperor about this, they received twelve gifts in compensation. And when they wanted to cross the Vltava River, which was very swollen, near the city of Vurcin,[30] they lost another goddess[31] along with a select company of fifty soldiers.[32]

The tutelary banner of the city of Arkona was called *Stanica*, according to Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 14.39.15 and not only accompanied the armies in campaign but also dispensed inviolability to their bearers:

> They were so confident about this work that the tower that was located above the door was only protected with signs and banners. Among these was Stanica,[33] standing out for its size and colour, which the Rugian people venerated just as much as the greatness of almost all the gods together. Since, by carrying it in front of them, they had the power to transgress human and divine law, and they considered that nothing they wanted to do was illegal: they could devastate cities, demolish altars, put divine law and sin on the same level, cast all the houses of Rügen into ruin or into flames, and there was so much trust in superstition that the authority of a small piece of cloth was superior to the strength of true power. They honoured the one who struck himself with the banner, as if it were an almost divine sign, compensating damages with services, and injuries with gifts.[34]

Again, we find sacred banners in the narration of one of the biographers of the Pomeranian evangelist, St. Otto of Bamberg, more specifically Ebbo, who composed his *Life of St. Otto, Bishop of Bamberg*[35] between 1151 and 1159. The banners do not appear in military service in the *Life of St. Otto* 3.3.

> Therefore, [St. Otto] after asking for his blessing [the archbishop of Magdeburg, Norbert], the next day he went to the diocese of Havelberg, which, at that time was so ravaged by the frequent incursions of the pagans that only meagre remains of the Christian name

29 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 71.

30 In modern German, it is the city of Wurzen.

31 It must be assumed that this is another sacred banner.

32 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 74.

33 The name of this sacred banner seems to be related to the Polish word *stanica* (banner).

34 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 189.

35 Köpke, "Vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis," 822–82.

> were to be found in it. On the same day of his arrival, the city, full of banners of such an idol called Gerovit, celebrated a feast in his honour.[36]

This god Gerovit may be the transcription into medieval Latin of a Slavic theonym, Jarovit, the guardian deity of Wolgost. A primitively solar and fertility value is usually attributed to this divinity, which would be confirmed by the round and brilliant iconography of a golden shield, such as Ebbo describes to us in *Life of St. Otto* 3.8:

> But a clergyman called Dietrich, who had already gone before them and had approached the doors of the temple itself, not knowing where to go, boldly broke into the same sanctuary. Seeing the gold shield consecrated to Gerovit, who was the god of his army, hanging on the wall, which was illegal to touch, he grabbed it and came out to face his men. And these men were such simpletons that they thought it was the god Gerovit who appeared before them and, stunned, they backed away and fell to the ground.[37]

A similar story also appears in Herbord, *Dialogue on the Life of Saint Otto of Bamberg* 3.6 specifying that the shield of God was carried by Wolgost's armies to all battles to guarantee victory. Both the Gerovit shield and the oracular horses that can only be mounted by the invisible divinity are subject to the taboo against tampering.

There would have been a transfer of duties to an eminent warrior because of the difficult circumstances to which the West Slavs would be subjected. This scenario would confirm the etymology of the name: Jarovit would be an epiclesis formed by the well-known adjectival suffix *-ovit* (cf. Sventovit) and aesl. *jarъ* (spring): it would therefore be the refreshing spring sun.

Possible, although of doubtful historical authenticity, is the magical ritual destined to separate the invisible tethers that tie together the legs of the Lutici combatants' horses, literary parallels of the Latins, who fight against the Bohemians, equivalent to the Trojans, according to Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.11. The truth is that the ritual described makes sense from our knowledge of sympathetic magic, because we know that tying and untying is a recurring magical activity, but the strongly rhetorical character of the text makes us doubt its information:

> Meanwhile, a certain woman, one of the Eumenides,[38] when calling her stepson, who was about to leave for war, said: "Although it is not usual for stepmothers to behave well with their stepchildren, I do not forget the relationship I had with your father:
>
> *I will make you cautious so you can live, if you want.*
>
> He knows that the vampires and the wraiths of the Bohemians have defeated our Eumenides with their enchantments so, seeing as our men are all dead, the victory will be for the Bohemians.

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36 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 124.

37 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 126–27.

38 The term *Eumenides* is used by Cosmas in a general way to define any priestly role assigned to women. He also uses it to define the three daughters of Krok (*Chronica Bohemorum* 1, 4). The source of this designation is Virgil: Virgil, *Aeneid* VI 280; 6 374–75; Kras, *Kultura antyczna w kronikach Anonima zwanego Gallem i Kosmasa z Pragi*, 108.

> *So that you can escape this disaster.*
>
> When you kill an enemy in the first fight, cut off both his ears and put them in your bag, take out your sword and use it to make the figure of the cross on the ground between your horse's legs. By doing this you will unleash the invisible bonds through which your horses lose their strength, bound by the wrath of the gods, and fall, as if they were exhausted after a long journey; then jump on the horse and, even if an invincible fear assails you, do not look back but ride away quickly and you will thus be the only one to escape alive. Because the gods who went with you to combat, turned their backs on you to help your enemies."[39]

The ritualization of aspects of combat can affect the way prisoners of war are treated. Procopius *De bello Gothico* 3.38.17–23 tells us in great detail how the Slavs acted in the sixth century with conquered populations. In principle, his description calls our attention to the cruelty of the Slavic invaders, who do not take prisoners of war but exterminate the entire population. However, the strongly ritualized character of their behaviour seems to conceal a way of acting that is characteristic of a military ritual: enemies must be exterminated following a meticulous execution procedure, which has more to do with human sacrifices than with pure military combat needs:

> They killed those they encountered not with the sword or the spear or with any of the usual methods but, ramming stakes firmly into the ground and sharpening them as much as possible, sat the poor victims on top of them with much force, inserting the point of the stakes between their buttocks up until the entrails of the men in question, as they believed this was the right way to execute them. Likewise, these Barbarians stuck four thick pieces of wood into the ground and tied the hands and feet of the prisoners to them, and then struck them ceaselessly on the temples with maces thus putting an end to them like dogs, snakes or other beasts. Others they shut into their huts along with the cows and sheep they could not take back with them and there they burned them without mercy. Thus did the Sclaveni kill all those they encountered.[40]

Rituals after Combat

An essential aspect of group cohesion maintained with the help of special rituals lies in the behaviour of those killed in combat. Warriors have to go to battle knowing that if they die there, the funeral rites of their society must be guaranteed.[41] The guarantees of dignified treatment for those killed in combat are firmly preserved in other Indo-European traditions: as Krentz[42] notes, the Greeks took the recovery of corpses and the ritual treatment of the dead very seriously; six Athenian generals were sentenced to death in 406 BCE for not having complied with that ritual obligation after the naval battle

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39 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 97–98.

40 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 26. For an analysis of this ritual, see Luján, "Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* III 38.17–23: A Description of Ritual Pagan Slavic Slayings?," 105–12.

41 Pritchett, *The Greek State at War*, 96.

42 Krentz, "War," 212.

of the Arginusae. Like the Athenians,[43] the Slavs incinerated their dead after combat, as Leo the Deacon tells us in *History* 9.6. Leo was born in Caloe, in Asia Minor, around 950, but was educated in Constantinople, where he was ordained a deacon, as reflected by the nickname with which he is known. The year of his death is not known. The ten books of his *History*,[44] which he must have started writing in 992, cover the events that occurred during the reigns of Roman II, Nicephorus II, John Tzimiskes and the first years of the reign of Basil II, from 959 to 975, and it is unfinished.

> At nightfall and under a full moon, they went out to the plain and carefully checked their own dead. After gathering them together in front of the city walls and setting many fires, they were cremated, slaughtering most of the prisoners, both men and women, as was customary in their homeland. As offerings to the dead, they drowned breastfeeding children and roosters in the Istro,[45] throwing them into the fast flowing river. In fact, it is said that, being subject to Greek mysteries, they made sacrifices and libations for the deceased in the Greek way, as they had been taught by their own philosophers[46] Anacharsis and Zalmoxis or by Achilles' companions.[47]

There is archaeological evidence of these collective cremations, according to Barford.[48] This incineration was accompanied by human sacrifices in honour of fallen Homeric heroes, as Homer tells us (*Iliad* 23,179–193). Human sacrifices on the fallen may help us understand the testimony of cruelty transmitted by the aforementioned text of Procopius.

Brelich[49] postulated the existence of a distinction between human sacrifice, in which death is accompanied by the ritual offering to a divinity, and "ritual death," which occurs after the fighting is over, where there is no mention of a divine recipient of the offering. However, those sacrificed after combat are killed instead of being already dead and have

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43 Krentz, "War," 175.

44 Karalis, *Λεών Διάκονος. Ιστορία.*

45 Greek name of the Danube. The text transmits to us a military action in the area near the river mouth.

46 As Leo identifies the Slavs with the Scythians, he quotes characters from the Scythian religious tradition. Anacharsis was a prince of Scythian origin who visited Athens, was a friend of Solon and dedicated himself to philosophy, as we were informed by Herodotus 4.46.76–77, Aristotle *APo.*78b30 and Strabo 7.3.8, among other classic authors. Lucian of Samosata wrote a short work entitled *Anacharsis* about him. The reason he is mentioned here is that Herodotus narrates that he was responsible for introducing the Greek cults to the Mother of the Gods (Cybele) among the Scythians. Zalmoxis was a mythical character whose oldest reference is found in Herodotus 4.94–95, where he appears as a divinity to whom Thracians made a human sacrifice every five years by throwing a man onto three spears held by other men. Before the victim died, the message they wanted him to convey to the divinity was communicated, since he was considered a messenger.

47 Reference to book XI of the *Odyssey* that narrates the descent of Odysseus to hell, where he finds Achilles and his companions, who inform him about life in Hades; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 42–43.

48 Barford, *The Early Slavs*, 120.

49 Brelich, "Symbol of a Symbol," 200.

a similar function to that of votive offerings, in which a victim instead of a living person is offered, so these deaths should still be looked upon as human sacrifices in a ritual context.[50]

Other times, the texts leave us doubting whether we are facing real human sacrifices in compensation for those killed in combat or bloody revenge. Thus, when Thietmar of Merseburg tells us in his *Chronicon* 4.13 that Boleslaw II of Bohemia (972–999) goes to war against Mieszko I of Poland (962–992) and becomes an ally of the Slavic tribe of the Lutici, who see death of the head of a conquered city as a human sacrifice:

> From there he returned [Boleslaw] to a city called […][51] and, without the opposition of its inhabitants, he conquered it along with his superior and handed the latter over to the Lutici to behead. Immediately, [the Lutici] offer these sacrifices to the gods helping them before the city and everyone deals with the matter of their return.[52]

The same goes for the killings of some Christians during the anti-Christian revolt from the Retharii of 1066. The fact that the head of Bishop John Scotus is offered to the divinity in the temple of Riedegost sanctifies an act of violence, as Adam of Bremen tells us in *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg*[53] 3.51:

> The ageing Bishop John,[54] captured with other Christians in the city of Mecklenburg, was kept alive to be displayed in triumph. He was therefore beaten with whips for having confessed to Christ, then taken by each of the Slavic cities to be mocked, as he could not be made to deny his faith in Christ. After cutting off his hands and feet, his body was thrown into the street, but not before stripping it of its head, which the pagans nailed to a pike and offered to their god Redigost as proof of victory. These events occurred in Rethra, the Slavic capital, on the fourth day before the ides of November.[55]

The news that the Slavic pagans sacrificed Christians becomes a topic skilfully used by German princes and bishops. In 1108, Adelgot, archbishop of Magdeburg, together with the bishops Albuino of Merseburg, Walram of Neuenburg, Hervig of Meissen, Hecil of Havelberg, Hartbroth of Brandenburg and a series of nobles from northern Germany, sent a letter[56] begging for the support of their companions in the episcopate and the nobility from the rest of Germany, Flanders and France. The letter was based on the anti-Christian violence that had become widespread in Slavia after the murder of the Christian prince of the Obotrites, Godescalc (June 7, 1066) and was inspired by the

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50 Bonnechère, *Le sacrifice humain en Grèce ancienne*, 13.

51 The manuscript leaves room for seven letters.

52 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 70.

53 Schmeidler, *Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis cronica Slavorum*.

54 *Scholia* 81: "This John, who came to Saxony on a trip from Scotland, was kindly received by our archbishop, like everyone else, and not long afterwards he was sent to Slavia to Prince Gotescalc; in the days he lived with him they say he baptised many thousands of pagans."

55 November 10, 1066: Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 85.

56 Israel and Möllenberg, *Urkundenbuch des Erzstifts Magdeburg*, Nr. 193, 249–252.

principles of the First Crusade. The consequence of such an appeal was the meeting of a council in Merseburg to study the measures to be taken, which consisted of an expedition led by Lothair, Duke of Saxony, in the summer of 1110. This letter speaks of a divinity, Pripegala, which is not mentioned anywhere else, to which human sacrifices are offered within the context of a war against Christians:

> The most fanatical among them [the pagan Slavs] say, every time they want to have fun at banquets, "our Pripegala—vehemently—wants heads, so sacrifices must be made." Pripegala, as they call him, is a shameless Priapus and Belphegor. Thus, after slaughtering Christians before the altars of their idols, they fill the craters with human blood and, screaming in a horrifying manner, they say: "Let's make this a day of joy, Christ has been defeated by the victorious Pripegala."[57]

The etymology of the name Pripegala is much discussed. Brückner[58] proposed an etymology **pribyhvalъ* "that increases his praise"; Boyer[59] makes it derive from common Slavic *piklъ* "bitumen, tar," preceded by the preverb *pri-* so it would mean "the blackened" and would be related to the theonyms *Chernaglov* (Black Head) and that of the goddess *Siwa* (the Dark One). Loma[60] reconstructs a name **pribygolva*, which would come to mean "head hunter," and would be quite consistent with what is said about him in the letter from Archbishop Adelgot. The connection with Priapus and Belphegor is not proof of a sexual function of the Slavic divinity but is simply an *interpretatio romana* that is brought about by the phonetic proximity of the first and last syllable of both names.

In the temple of Riedegost, votive offerings were made after returning from combat, along the lines suggested by Procopius *De bello Gothico* 3.14.22–30. An oracular inquiry was conducted using the horse dedicated to the deity to find out which were the most convenient victims, according to Thietmar in *Chronicon* 6.25:

> When they go to war they greet her and when they return successfully they honour her with votive offerings. A diligent inquiry is conducted through the fortunes and the enshrined horse, as stated above, to know which propitiatory victims must be offered to the gods by the priests.[61]

Thietmar *Chronicon* 6.24 describes in detail the oracular ritual that is performed with the horse, which not only has a military function, but is also an oracle of success/non-success applicable to any company that always served as an oracle of confirmation. The ritual described by Thietmar is consistent with those performed by other Indo-European traditions destined for chthonic divinities, for which a hole was dug (Lat. *mundus*); equally consistent with what we know of the Roman religion is the murmured prayer and the obligation of the priests to sit down, as also described in the *Iguvine Tables.*

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57 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 90.

58 Brückner, *Mitologia Slava*, 223.

59 Boyer, "Mitos eslavos y bálticos," 228.

60 Loma, *Prakosovo. Slovenski i indoevropski koreni srpske epike*.

61 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 73.

> Priests are trained among the natives to guard these places closely. When they sacrifice something for the idols or placate their anger, they sit down, while the others remain standing and, muttering to one another in secret, digging the earth with a reverent tremor, in the very place where they cast lots and clarify their doubts. Afterwards, they cover it with green grass and, in a supplicant and humble manner, lead a horse that they look upon as the greatest and which they venerate as sacred, over two spears crossing each other and stuck in the ground; through this divine animal, a new omen is obtained over the previous lots used for previous investigations. And if the omen is identical in both operations, it is carried out; but if not, the saddened inhabitants immediately leave it.

We have already seen the use of a horse in the temples of Szczecin and Arkona to determine the success of the military company.

In addition to the rituals for the return, temples were also guaranteed the reception of some special offerings that were devoted to the temple and the tithe of the spoils of war. This custom that appears in other Indo-European cultures: Plutarch, *The Pythia's Prophecies* 401c provides a practical description of the booties of war enshrined in the sanctuary of Delphi in a very similar way to another of St. Otto's biographers, Herbord, *Dialogue on the Life of Saint Otto of Bamberg* 32 referring to the temple Szczecin: "According to ancestral customs, the captured booties and weapons of the enemies, as well as what was obtained from naval combats or land battles converge to this temple, pursuant to the law of tithing."[62]

Like the Szczecin temple, the Arkona temple also received a very important part of the booty including precious metals, according to Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum*[63] 1.36 and 1.38 and Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 39.2–13.

Military Rituals during Peacetimes

Day-to-day peace was short-lived among the pre-Christian Slavs and the reasons for the outbursts could have multiple causes. One of them was the violation of the right to hospitality, considered a sacred duty for the Slavs;[64] moreover, the ritual purity of the population was ensured by the return of prisoners of war after the payment of a ransom or social insertion in terms of freedom, as the Emperor Maurice, *Strategikon* 11.4 tells us at the beginning of the seventh century (the text is adapted at the beginning of the tenth century by Emperor Leo VI, the Wise, *Tactics* 18.102–105). The *Strategikon* is a military training manual in 12 books[65] intended for middle commands that, in most of the preserved manuscripts, is attributed to Emperor Maurice (582–602). According to its account on the Slavs and their sacred hospitality, it says as follows:

> They are pleasant and friendly with foreigners who are among them and alternate to take them safe and sound wherever they need to go, because if the guest is harmed in any

62 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 137.

63 Schmeidler, *Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis cronica Slavorum*.

64 Conte, *Les slaves*, 275–78.

65 Dennis, *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*.

> way due to the carelessness of the person protecting him, the person who entrusted the guest to him declares war on the latter, since he considers it a sacred duty to avenge the foreigner. Prisoners of war are not kept as slaves for an indefinite time, like the others, but are allowed to do as they see fit after a given time, whether they want to return to their land by paying a ransom or stay there as free people and friends.[66]

When the Slavs are learning the culture and integrating into the cultural and economic life of the surrounding peoples, they look upon the slavery of prisoners of war as normal, and, for example, in the tenth century, Kiev becomes an important slave trading centre of commerce of slaves.[67]

As we have already mentioned,[68] an important part of the rituals related to war but carried out in peacetime has to do with pacts and oaths, which could be made sacred following various types, all inherited from the Indo-European tradition. Saxo Grammaticus 14.25.2 tells us how Domborus, an ambassador of the Rugians, goes to the Danes in 1160 to ask for peace from Bishop Absalon, who is preparing a military campaign against them:

> Absalom asked him to make an honest offer and he said he could throw a pebble into the water, as a form of guarantee. When the barbarians were going to make a treaty, for example, they would observe the rite of throwing a pebble into the water, saying that if they were to break the agreement, then they would perish, just as the stone would sink.[69]

The custom of sanctioning an oath by throwing a stone seems well attested among Indo-Europeans. In this case, the act of throwing the stone is looked upon as the destiny of the one who breaks the oath, as the Roman negotiator before the Carthaginians says in Polybius 3, 25:

> "If I sincerely swear I have done everything right; if I think or act differently, whilst others see that their homeland, their laws, their own life, their own temples and their own graves are safe, let me alone be expelled just as I now throw this stone." And uttering these words, he threw the stone.

Another interpretation, purely Slavic, is found in the ratification of the treaty of the year 985 between Vladimir I of Kiev and the Bulgarians: "there will be no peace between us when the stone begins to float and the hops to sink."[70] Sielicki[71] relates it to the Indo-Iranian water and fire rites of the oath and guilt confirmation.

Another type of solemn oath is that which warriors make on their weapons, to which they somehow endow with animation and submit them as evidence not only that they will not be used against those who sign the pact but also that they will not

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66 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 30–31.

67 Conte, *Les slaves*, 182–83.

68 See Chapter 3 "Oaths and Pledges."

69 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 179.

70 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 96.

71 Sielicki, "Indo-Iranian Parallels of the Slavic Water Rites of the Oath and Guilt Confirmation Attested in Medieval Latin Accounts and Slavic Law Codices," 35–37.

defend properly if they violate the pact. This oath, which has Indo-European origins, as described by West,[72] is preserved among the West Slavs, according to Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Bohemorum* 1.10 in the oath that the Bohemian prince, Vlastislav, makes for Mars, Bellona and the hilt of his sword. Solemnly, the Rus' warriors who signed the first peace treaty[73] in 907 with the Byzantine emperors, Leo and Alexander, swear by their weapons, and by the gods, Perun and Veles, as stated by the *PVL*, col. 32. Similarly, in the second treaty of 912, the Rus' warriors swear by their weapons (*PVL*, col. 33). This oath on arms would have a clear parallel between the southern Slavs in number 67 of the *Responses* of Pope Nicholas to the consultations of the Bulgarians, according to which "whenever you decided to make someone swear an oath on any matter, you placed a sword in the middle and the oath was sworn on it."[74]

The third treaty (*PVL*, col. 47–48), of 945, is more detailed and describes the self-exempting formula employed by pagan (non-baptized) Rus' warriors:

> and if they are not baptised, they do not get help from God or from Perun, they do not defend themselves with their own shields, they die for their swords, their arrows and their other weapons, and they are slaves in this world and the next. And anyone from our country who violates it, be they a prince or any other, either baptised or not, who is not helped by God, who is a slave in this world and the next and who is torn apart by his own weapon.[75]

Finally, the *PVL* presents the text of the peace treaty between Svyatoslav and the Byzantine emperors that was signed in 971, in which the gods Perun and Veles are cited once again as guarantors. It also includes the self-exemption formula of being killed by the weapons themselves and the threat of turning yellow like gold, maybe sick, thus violating the treaty.[76]

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72 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 463–64.

73 Šakhmatov already said that the treaty of 907 did not exist, but that it was inserted by the chronicler based on information from the treaty of 912, which did take place. Šakhmatov, *Neskol'ko zamečanii o dogovorakh s grekami Olega i Igora*, 69.

74 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 58.

75 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 273.

76 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 277.

Chapter 5

FUNERARY RITES

Was the Concept of the Afterlife Unknown to the Pre-Christian Slavs?

Such a question may legitimately arise for us if we consider a text by the eleventh-century German chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg belonging to his *Chronicon* (1.14),[1] who states as follows:

> Though I may act as the whetstone which sharpens the iron but not itself, I would not be marked by the shame of a mute dog. Thus I direct the following to the ignorant and especially to the Slavs who believe that everything ends with temporal death.[2]

However, a better understanding of the excerpt from Thietmar's *Chronicon* forces us to analyze its context: the text appears in the middle of a digression that the author embarks upon to discuss the omens that can foresee death, and follows by describing the evidence of the immortal life of the soul[3] and of the resurrection of the flesh. According to Thietmar, those omens were not accepted by the pre-Christian Slavs, and that is why he says the Slavs "believe that everything ends with temporal death." The fact that such omens, whose importance was underlined by Thietmar throughout his work, were not commonly included among the traditional beliefs of the Slavs, would be confirmed by another text written in the mid-sixth century by Procopius of Caesarea,[4] a Byzantine author who was secretary to Belisarius, general of the emperor Justinian:

> Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars. The Gothic War* 3.14: But as for fate, they neither know it, nor do they in any wise admit that it has any power among them.[5]

Therefore, Thietmar's text must be read with those critical precautions and it does not mean that the Slavs lacked eschatological concepts, but obviously that they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or in the omens of a sudden death.

In contrast to the relevance that has been given to the fragment of Thietmar (out of context), another line of research insists that the Slavs rendered veneration to the dead and to their ancestors.[6] The funerary banquets, as we will see, would be the evidence for such a belief.

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1 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 21.

2 Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 78.

3 Brückner, *Mitologia Slava*, 174; Krawiec, "Sny, widzenia i zmarli w kronice Thietmara z Merseburga," 33–48.

4 Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 2.

5 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271.

6 Vyncke, "The Religion of the Slavs," 648–66.

Likewise, the most relevant information that can be found in the sources regarding the attitudes of the Slavs towards death and the afterlife comes from the description of the funerary rites.

Funerary Rites among the Pre-Christian Slavs

Cremation

Arab authors always paid special attention to the funerary rites of the peoples they came into contact with, presumably because of the emphasis that is made by Islam on the sanctity of dead bodies and the respect they must be shown. Regarding this, the dialogue that the famous tenth-century Arab traveller Ibn Faḍlān has with a *Rus'* on cremation is highly relevant:

> Ibn Faḍlān, *Muʿǧam al-Buldān,* "Rūssiyah":[7] One of the Rūsiyyah stood beside me and I heard him speaking to my interpreter. I quizzed him about what he had said, and he replied, "He said, 'You Arabs are a foolish lot!' " So I said, "Why is that?" and he replied, "Because you purposely take those who are dearest to you and whom you hold in highest esteem and throw them under the earth, where they are eaten by the earth, by vermin and by worms, whereas we burn them in the fire there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately." Then he laughed loud and long. I quizzed him about that [i.e., the entry into Paradise] and he said, "Because of the love which my Lord feels for him. He has sent the wind to take him away within an hour." Actually, it took scarcely an hour for the ship, the firewood, the slave-girl and her master to be burnt to a fine ash.[8]

Moreover, the earliest and most reliable testimony of an Eastern Slavic funerary rite can be found in Ibn Rustah's *Book of Precious Gems*:[9]

> When one of them dies they burn him with fire and the women, when someone close to them dies, cut their hands and their face with a knife. When they cremate the deceased, they return to where he is in the morning, collect the ashes, put them in an urn and place them in a burial mound. When the person has been dead for a year, they place the amount of approximately twenty wooden urns of honey. They carry this to the mound, gather together the family of the deceased, and eat and drink there.[10]

Thanks to the fact that the Arab author thought that Slavic customs were scandalous, we know that the usual rite among the Slavs was cremation, something that violated the idea that he had on the sanctity of corpses, in accordance with the Islamic religion. In addition to cremation, the funerary ritual included ritualized self-harm of the deceased man's wives. The fact that the latter had more than one wife indicates that the person was a member of the Eastern Slavic aristocracy.

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7 Wüstenfeld, "Risāla Ibn Faḍlān," 83. For a discussion on the identity of the people called "Rūssiyah" in this account, see Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 23–25.

8 Translation in: Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 20–21.

9 De Goeje, *Abū ʿAli Aḥmed b. ʿUmar b. Rusta,* 143–48.

10 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 455; De Goeje, *Abū ʿAli Aḥmed b. ʿUmar b. Rusta,* 143.

The rite also marks a ritualization of the time following cremation: the next morning the ashes are gathered and put inside an urn that is buried in a mound. It thus becomes the space devoted to the "living memory" of the deceased, where the ceremonies for his commemoration are celebrated. The act of putting the ashes inside an urn that is buried in a mound has several Indo-European parallels: it was done in the ancient Greek tradition with Patroclus (*Il.* 23.243–256), and with Achilles (*Od.* 24.72–84), or in the Germanic tradition with Harald (*Saxo Grammaticus* 8.5.1). In the Vedic tradition, the bones were collected a few days after cremation and were put inside a jar that could also be placed in a mound.[11]

One year later an offering of honey is made, an element that becomes a symbol of immortality because of its physical characteristic of incorruptibility. Together with this offering, a funerary banquet is held to honour the deceased.

Likewise, the same type of burial custom, together with the ritual killing of human beings, is attested among the East Slavs[12] by a Byzantine author, Leo the Deacon, in his *History*.[13] In this work, the author gives first-hand information on Prince Svyatoslav I of Kiev, who invaded Bulgaria in 969 while fighting against the army of the Byzantine Empire. When narrating the result of a combat with Svyatoslav's soldiers, he describes the customs of the *Rus'* regarding the dead during combat:

> Leo the Deacon, *History* 9.6: When night fell, since the moon was nearly full, they [the Rus'] came out on the plain and searched for their dead; and they collected them in front of the city wall and kindled numerous fires and burned them, after slaughtering on top of them many captives, both men and women, in accordance with their ancestral custom. And they made sacrificial offerings by drowning suckling infants and chickens in the Istros,[14] plunging them into the rushing waters of the river.[15]

The Slavs' ritual of cremation of the dead has been widely confirmed by archaeologists[16] and has numerous parallels in other well-known Indo-European customs, such as the Hittite, Greek, Vedic and Latin traditions.[17] Confirmation of the practice comes both from textual data and from archaeological evidence. The cremation ceremony of a Slavic nobleman could be performed together with either self-sacrifice rituals of the relatives of the dead or the non-voluntary slaughter of women, slaves or cattle including the burning of the dead's belongings.

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11 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 497.

12 Although Leo the Deacon calls this people "Scythian," taking into account the place and time where they are located, as well as their description, they are commonly identified as Slavs.

13 See Chapter 4, section "Rituals after combat."

14 Ancient Greek name of the river Danube.

15 Talbot and Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 193.

16 Conte, *Les slaves,* 164; Barford, *The Early Slavs*, 200–208; Holzer, "Gli slavi prima del loro arrivo in occidente," 23.

17 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 725–30.

A "positivist" explanation of the cremation ritual suggests that it could be related to hygiene and it was developed by "primitive" peoples in permanent danger of infections caused by decomposing corpses. Cremation of wives, slaves, cattle and goods of the deceased may also have had a prophylactic function.[18] However, the clear link that was made between the cremation ritual and the aristocratic practice could also imply religious motivations in the Indo-European traditions where such a practice was preserved. It is possible that they harboured the belief that fire set by religious professionals consumed the mortal part of the body, but at the same time ensured access to the afterlife.[19]

Funerary Banquet

Funerary banquets such as the one described by Ibn Rustah[20] were common. It is important the mention that he makes on the date when they took place: one year after the relative's death in whose honour it was celebrated.

Abundant parallels can be found for ritualized funerary banquets in the Indo-European domain. For instance, people from ancient India honoured the deceased *pitaras* (forefathers) on the anniversary of the death, during which a ritual cake was prepared and invocations were made so that the dead could find their way to the other world.[21] In Athens, the ritualized banquet was celebrated on special dates, specifically on the third day of *Anthesterias*, during a festival called *Chytroi*.[22] The Romans held a banquet called *Silicernium* shortly after the funerary rite. In addition to this banquet, a feast called *Cena Novendialis* was held on the ninth day after the funerals, and it marked the family's return to social life, interrupted during the time of mourning.[23] The most important annual remembrance to honour the deceased of the family was the *Parentalia*.[24]

The testimony of Ibn Rustah on the burial practice of cremation associated to a funerary banquet coincides with the information provided by the *PVL* when describing the funerary rites of different East Slavic tribes:

> Whenever a death occurred, a feast[25] was held over the corpse, and then a great pyre was constructed, on which the deceased was laid and burned. After the bones were

18 Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 730.

19 Mendoza studies from such perspective Homeric and Vedic rituals: Mendoza, "Muerte e Inmortalidad: Homero y las creencias indoeuropeas," 555–66. Cf. *Odyssey* 11.601–627, *Rigveda* 10.14.8, 10.16.1.

20 See former section Cremation.

21 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 394.

22 Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians*, 116–17.

23 Dowden, *European Paganism,* 264.

24 Lindsay, "Eating with the Dead: the Roman Funerary Banquet," 67–80; Dowden, *European Paganism,* 267.

25 In the Slavic original we read the word *tryzna*, that is, the funerary banquet in honour of the deceased.

> collected, they were placed in a small urn and set upon a post by the roadside, even as the Vyatichians do to this day. Such customs were observed by the Krivichians and the other pagans, since they did not know the law of God, but made a law unto themselves.[26]

Here is mentioned an urn set upon a post by the roadside where the bones and ashes were placed after the cremation of the corpse, a custom performed by some East Slavic tribes. It reminds us of the funerary urns with the shape of small huts that can be found too in the Lusatian culture, in the later Bronze Age and early Iron Age in Eastern Poland and Western Ukraine.

Burials in isolated places, such as forests and fields, as well as at crossroads, are attested also among the West Slavs by Cosmas of Prague in his *Chronica Bohemorum* (*Chronicle of the Czechs*), in the passage that has already been discussed in Chapter 2, on fertility rituals. This may be due either to the need for physical separation of the living and the dead, or to the sacred nature of forests and fields, as well as to the liminal character of crossroads, which, together with rivers and lakes, could play an important role in their rites of passage. In addition, we have another East Slavonic testimony of certain paranormal activity associated to an idol of the god Veles placed by the roadside in the vicinity of the city of Rostov, close to Lake Nero. It can be found in the *Life of St. Abraham of Rostov*,[27] a controversial saint who might have lived at the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth century, though his existence is questioned by some scholars. The earliest copy of his hagiography dates back to the fifteenth century, and the text says:

> The venerable (Abraham) beheld the deceit of idolatry in which (the inhabitants of Rostov) indulged, for they had not yet received holy baptism, but in a place of miracles worshipped a stone idol (of god Veles) in which an evil demon lived, for their hearts were shrouded in darkness. When they passed by him on that road, no one laughed, as that created spectres and ghosts for Christians through its malign darkness. The venerable Abraham prayed to God, saying: "Lord God, the Most High! Look down on your servant from on high and give me the strength and grace of your Holy Spirit to destroy this devious idol." But it was impossible for him.[28]

Finally, the saint received help from an unknown old traveller who appeared to be St. John the Evangelist, who gave Abraham his miraculous staff in order to destroy the idol, an action that reminds us very much of the magic wands of fairy tales. St. Abraham subsequently established a monastery dedicated to the Epiphany of the Lord in the same place where the evil idol of Veles had stood, the first mention of which can be found in the *Chronicle of Vladimir-Suzdal'*, dating back to the fourteenth century, in the entry corresponding to the year 1261.[29]

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26 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 56–57; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 268–69.

27 Kostomarov, *Skazaniya, legendy, povesti, skazki i pritchi*, 221–25.

28 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 418.

29 Karskii, *Lavrent'evskaya letopis' i suzdal'skaya letopis po akademicheskomu spisku*, 476, 5.

The god Veles appears with its variant name Volos in the peace treaties of 907 and 971 between the Rus' and the Byzantines as contained in the *PVL*, where he is referred to as "the god of cattle."[30] However, the place where his idol stood according to the *Life of St. Abraham of Rostov* (in an isolated spot by the roadside close to a lake), together with the strange phenomena and ghosts that it produced would link the god to the dead. This interpretation is confirmed by the etymological explanation of the name, which coincides with different Indo-European cognates.[31] We have already seen among the West Slavs other cases of lakes associated with oracular rites that also displayed otherworldly connections.[32] Moreover, there is a mention in the *Memoir and Encomium of Prince Vladimir*,[33] written by a certain monk Jacob, that could support this interpretation of the god Veles as both the god of cattle and the god of the dead. He was not listed in the *PVL* among the gods belonging to Prince Vladimir's pantheon in Kiev.[34] However, this could be because the idol of Volos (Veles) was not erected on top of the hill of Kiev as the other gods, but in the lower side of the city known as Podol,[35] a fertile pasture by the river Pochaina[36] where cattle used to graze, and where the idol was located according to the *Memoir and Encomium*.[37] Therefore, the pasture for the cattle of Kiev was located by a river, the natural boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead.[38] This would be the most appropriate place for the idol of Volos (Veles) to stand.

Summarizing the information that we have through the texts on the funerary banquets of the dominant class among the East Slavs, called *tryzna*, allows us to identify a set of characteristic common features, namely the presence of many warriors, the consumption of alcohol to the point of drunkenness, the construction of a mound on the grave, and the widow's lament for her dead husband.[39] All these can be found also in the *PVL* in the following description belonging to the story of Princess Olga's third revenge on the Derevlians for the murder of her husband, Prince Igor, in 945:

> Olga then sent to the Derevlians the following message, "I am now coming to you, so prepare great quantities of mead in the city where you killed my husband, that I may

30 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 269, 277.

31 The name Veles would come from the Proto-Indo-European *wel- meaning originally "pasture, meadow" and subsequently "dwelling of the dead" and "god of the dead." Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 723. For other possible etymologies: Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 83–84.

32 See the testimonies regarding the sacred lakes among the West Slavs in Chapter 2, The Sacred Lake of Glomuzi and the Auguries of Fertility.

33 Sreznevskii, "Pamyat' i pokhvala knyazyu Vladimiru i ego zhitie po sp. 1494 g.," 2–12.

34 See Chapter 2, Svarozhich.

35 Neighbourhood of Podil in modern Kiev.

36 Small tributary of the river Dnieper.

37 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 298–99.

38 For the afterworld as a pasture among the Indo-Europeans, see Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 722–23.

39 Petrukhin, "Pogrebal'nyi kult drevnerusskom yazychestve," 396–404.

> weep over his grave and hold a funeral feast for him." When they heard these words, they gathered great quantities of honey and brewed mead. Taking a small escort, Olga made the journey with ease, and upon her arrival at Igor's tomb, she wept for her husband. She bade her followers pile up a great mound and when they had piled it up, she also gave command that a funeral feast should be held. Thereupon the Derevlians sat down to drink, and Olga bade her followers wait upon them. The Derevlians inquired of Olga where the retinue was which they had sent to meet her. She replied that they were following with her husband's bodyguard. When the Derevlians were drunk, she bade her followers fall upon them, and went about herself egging on her retinue to the massacre of the Derevlians. So they cut down five thousand of them; but Olga returned to Kiev and prepared an army to attack the survivors.[40]

The text is very interesting since it gives a detailed account of the aforementioned practices. Banqueting to honour the deceased was a basic way of feasting the death of a relative. It was useful ultimately in order to celebrate being alive, as well as to strengthen the family and reinforce social cohesion, in addition to showing respect for the deceased, which could be understood as a kind of cult to the ancestors. In this sense, in the text quoted from the *PVL* the celebration made by the Kievan people, a celebration of being alive, is set against the punishment inflicted on the Derevlians, who were massacred by taking advantage of their drunken state.

There is only one action that does not appear in the former excerpt: self-immolation of the widow. On the contrary, here the widow's lament seems to replace the act of killing herself. Perhaps, Ol'ga's heroic character makes her special enough not to have to sacrifice herself on her husband's grave. Or the long and complex revenge[41] exempts her from self-immolation, being replaced in this case by the ritualized triple sacrifice of her husband's murderers: buried alive in a boat, burned alive in a bathhouse, massacred while drunk during the funeral banquet.[42] The widow's lament is a softened or "literary" equivalent of the ritualized self-injuries of which Ibn Rustah spoke.[43]

Moreover, the expression "she wept for her husband" leads us to suggest the possible existence of a ritual funeral lament or threne on the dead husband's tomb. Unfortunately, we do not have any further textual information, except perhaps from the lament of Yaroslavna for her wounded husband, Prince Igor Svyatoslavich, as it appears in the twelfth-century East Slavic epic poem known as *Tale of Igor's Campaign*:

> (1) The mourners sing in the Danube. Yaroslávna hears their voice; she moans early like a cuckoo[44] in the unknown land:–"I will fly" she spoke,–"like a cuckoo along the Danube;

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40 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 80; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 276.

41 García de la Puente, "The Revenge of the Princess: Some Considerations about Heroines in the *PVL* and in Other Indo-European Literatures," 195.

42 Koptev, "Ritual and History: Pagan Rites in the Story of the Princess' Revenge (the Russian Primary Chronicle, under 945–46)," 21–37; see The Baths of the Dead.

43 See former section.

44 According to Ryan, in general the cuckoo was a bad omen of death and famine. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight,* 125.

> I will wet my beaver sleeves in the Kayála river, I will wipe away for the prince his bloody wounds on his stricken body."[45]

The main difference between Ol'ga and Yaroslavna is that the latter's husband did not die from his wounds, unlike the former's, who was also called Igor. The custom of the widow's lament for her dead husband is very well attested in other Indo-European literary traditions: in the ancient Greek tradition it is done twice by Andromache on her husband Hector's death (*Il.* 22.483–507, 24.725–738); in ancient Indian epics it is performed by Tārā over her husband Vālin's body (*Rm.* 4.20.14–15).[46]

Ritual Sacrifice of the Widows

The ritual sacrifice of the widow was reported among the East Slavs by the aforementioned Ibn Rustah's *Book of Precious Gems*, though in a different way. First, in a symbolic way, by cutting her hands and face with a knife, and secondly in an explicit description of a voluntary suicide by hanging herself, something that the author finds more scandalous:

> Afterwards they retire and if the deceased had three wives and one of them considers herself to be his favourite, she stands before the deceased with two posts and erects them in the surface of the ground. She then places another post across the top of the other two, hangs a rope in the middle which she ties around her neck and stands on the chair. When she has done this, the chair which is under her is removed and she hangs there until she strangles herself and dies. When she is dead, she is thrown onto the fire and burned.[47]

This practice is confirmed by other early testimonies. We can find a similar kind of sacrifice of the widow during her husband's burial among the South Slavs, as it is described in the *Strategikon*[48] from the sixth century, attributed to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, who ruled between 582 and 602: XI.4. "Their women are more sensitive than any others in the world. When, for example, their husband dies, many look upon it as their own death and freely smother themselves, not wanting to continue their lives as widows."[49]

Chapter 4 of Book XI of *Strategikon* bears the title *Dealing with the Slavs, the Antes, and the Like* and includes an explanation of the customs and character of those peoples, as well as a whole set of tactical and strategic advice on how to confront them in war. As the author says at the end of the ethnographic excursus, the information that he offers on them is based both on his direct experience and from former treatises. Maurice's testimony is employed, in turn, as a source by Leo VI the Wise, Byzantine emperor

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45 Magnus, *The Tale of the Armament of Igor,* 19. After this fragment follows the famous invocation of Yaroslavna to the natural elements: to the wind, the water (river Dnieper) and the sun.

46 West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 499.

47 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 456; De Goeje, *Abū ʿAli Aḥmed b. ʿUmar b. Rusta,*143.

48 Dennis, *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*.

49 Dennis, *Maurice's Strategikon*, 120; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 31.

between 886 and 912, including an almost textual quotation in his *Tactica*:[50] XVIII.98. "Their women manifested particularly strong feelings. Many of them regarded the death of their husbands as their own and would have themselves suffocated, [finding it] unbearable to keep on living as widows."[51]

The same information is conveyed, in this case about the West Slavs, by Saint Boniface, the "Apostle of the Germans," during the eighth century. The following fragment[52] is found in a letter addressed by the saint, together with his fellow bishops Wera, Burghard, Werberht, Abel and Wilbalth, to King Æthelbald of the Mercians around 745–746. In the letter, the saint blamed the Saxons for the maintaining of depraved pagan sexual customs, praising the burial sacrifice of widows among the Wends, the name used in medieval Latin works for the Slavic tribes living in the Northern Holy Roman Empire. The excerpt reads as follows:

> Epistle 73, XL. […] And the Wends, the most degraded and depraved race of men, observe the mutual love of the married state with such zeal, that a wife, when her husband dies, refuses to live; the wife is thought deserving of praise, who brings death with her own hand and burns on the one pile with her husband.[53]

Like this, all the medieval extant sources coincide in describing the burial ritual as the cremation of the corpse closely linked with the sacrifice of the widow in all the Slavic areas, that is, South, East and West Slavs, which would constitute evidence of its ancient and pan-Slavic character. This ritual only has sense in the context of a conception of the afterlife in which a member belonging to the dominant caste, probably a warrior, takes with him all his beloved belongings, and in particular his favourite spouse.

The most striking parallel in other Indo-European religions would be the well-known *satī* attested in India. However, it is not exactly the same. In the Indian tradition, the widows burn themselves alive on their husbands' pyre, as, for instance, do Kṛṣṇa's four widows in *Mahābhārata* 16.8. Instead of this, what is recounted by historical authors on the Slavic funeral ceremony is a kind of ritualized suicide of the favourite wife of the deceased, normally by hanging or smothering; afterwards, the widow's body is burned on the funeral pyre together with her husband. Other Indo-European parallels with the Slavic tradition are incomplete. Procopius of Caesarea (*Bell. Goth.* 2.14) tells us that among the Herules, a Germanic people, the wife hangs herself afterwards by her husband's grave. Herodotus (*Hist.* 4.71.4–5) gives a detailed account of the funeral of a Scythian king. One of the king's concubines is strangled, as well as his most trustful servants. However, they are not burned on a funeral pyre, but entombed in a burial mound together with the king's body. Herodotus (*Hist.* 5.5), when describing the funeral of a Thracian chieftain, also gives us a partial parallel. His wives quarrel among

50 Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 107.969.

51 Dennis, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, 473; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 38.

52 Dümmler, "S. Bonifatii et Lulli Epistolae," 342.

53 Kylie, *The English Correspondence of Saint Boniface*, 166; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 51.

themselves to determine which one is the favourite. The one chosen by the deceased's friends is showered with praise, but unlike the Slavic ritual, she is not killed by hanging nor by smothering; rather, her throat is cut. Herodotus does not mention whether she is burned on a pyre with the husband or not. He merely says that she is entombed with him.

Finally, there is also a testimony of the self-cremation of widows among the East Slavs provided by the Arab historian Al-Mas'udi in his *Muruj adh-dhahab wa ma'adin al-jawhar* (*The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*).[54] The text is a kind of world history that he wrote about his travels during the first half of the tenth century. Specifically, on the funerary rites of the East Slavs, he said:

> I, 17: One of the various Pagan nations who live in his country (Khazar) are the Sekálibah (Sclavonians) and another the Rús (the Russians). They live in one of the two sides of this town; they burn their dead with their cattle, utensils, arms, and ornaments. When a man dies, his wife is burnt alive with him; but, when the wife dies, her husband is nor burnt. If a bachelor dies, he is married after his death. Women are glad to be burnt; for they cannot enter into paradise by themselves. This usage prevails also among the Hindus, as we have said. But the Hindus never burn a woman with her husband, unless it is her own wish.[55]

Thus, we see how Al-Mas'udi was already noting the similarity of the Slavic custom of the self-cremation of widows with the Hindu tradition; and he considered the latter more "humane" since it was always performed with the widow's consent, according to the author. His mention of the posthumous marriage of single young men is also very interesting, for it could be a way to complete their vital cycle in extremis. This was most probably to avoid their transformation into restless dead, which was one of the main worries for the Slavs with regard to the cult of the dead, as we will discuss later in this chapter.

Votive Victims

One of the oldest aspects of the Slavic conception of the afterlife that can be deduced from the rituals has been preserved in the *History of the Wars* of Procopius of Caesarea (VII. 14.23), dating from the sixth century, and specifically in Procopius' *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23), when speaking of the South Slavic peoples of the Sclaveni and the Antae. It deals with the idea that, faced with the risk of imminent death, the sacrifice of votive victims could guarantee the salvation of the offerer:

> but as for fate, they neither know it nor do they in any wise admit that it has any power among men, but whenever death stands close before them, either stricken with sickness

54 al-Rifā'ī, *Mas'ūdī, Murūğ aḏ-ḏahab wa ma'ādin al-ğawhar*.

55 Sprenger, *El-Mas'ūdī's Historical Encyclopaedia*, 407–8; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 466.

> or beginning a war, they make a promise that, if they escape, they will straightway make a sacrifice to the god in return for their life; and if they escape, they sacrifice just what they have promised, and consider that their safety has been bought with this same sacrifice.[56]

The underlying ideology, present in numerous cultures, is that the afterlife asks for a life in exchange, which can be paid through a votive sacrifice.

The Baths of the Dead

The presence of the dead in daily life and the rituals devoted to them is even more evident in the pre-Christian customs that were observed in Christianized societies, and especially among the East Slavs. We already mentioned the funeral banquet. However, another common practice was to honour the dead in the steam baths during a festival called *Radunitsa*, which coincided with the Christian Easter. It has been attested by several sermons dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*,[57] which gives the most detailed description:

> On Holy Thursday [people] offer to the dead meat and milk and eggs, heat the bath and pour [water] on the stove, and ashes amidst they scatter for the footprints, and say "wash yourselves." And undergarments [or "linen"] and towels they hang up and order them to rub themselves. The devils laugh at their evil-mindedness. And they enter to wash themselves and wallow in the ashes, and they show [or "leave"] in the ashes footprints like cockerels', for the temptation [of the people], and they use those linen and towels. And [the people] come to the heated bathhouse, and look in the ashes for footprints, and when they see in the ashes footprints, they say "there came to us the *navii* [spirits of the dead] to wash themselves."[58]

It is possible that the action of making the souls of the deceased, or *navĭę*, come to the steam baths with the offerings of food and drinks could be related to the dryness of a dead body, which has to be rehydrated by means of libations or, among the East Slavs, using the humidity of bathhouses. Another plausible parallel explanation—that does not contradict the former—can be found in the archaeological analysis of Celtiberian steam baths in the hillforts of the Iberian Peninsula. The warmth of the steam bath would stand for the development of the embryo inside the uterus in a symbolic way; the small and narrow aperture of the doors through which the people who entered those baths had to pass would give place to a ritualized representation of a rebirth. According to García Quintela,[59] the sweat houses in the Iron Age Iberian Peninsula probably had a

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56 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 23–24.

57 Monday of the second week after the Easter, that is, the Monday of St. Thomas, popularly known in the Kievan Rus' as *Radunitsa.* Ed. by Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 14–16.

58 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 29; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 397–98.

59 García Quintela, "Sobre las saunas en la Edad de Hierro en la Península ibérica: novedades, tipologías e interpretaciones," 125–26.

ritual function so that the warrior who returned from war could be reborn and return to society as a man of peace. Accordingly, such saunas were located at the entrance to the settlements. The Slavic ritual described by the medieval cleric contained the invocation of the deceased to make him appear inside his former community of the living thanks to the warmth of the symbolic uterus as represented by the steam bath. Finally, a complementary explanation could be that the bath of the dead would be a part of the Slavic funerary ritual made up of three actions: washing the body, burning the corpse on the pyre, and banqueting and feasting. These three actions were implicit or explicit in the triple revenge performed by Princess Ol'ga,[60] together with burial in a boat that could have a Scandinavian origin.[61] According to Koptev,[62] the ceremonies had nothing to do with revenge, but would instead be the different purifying rituals of the Slavic pre-Christian funeral ceremony for Ol'ga's deceased husband. In Koptev's opinion, those rituals would have been transformed into the stages of the princess' revenge by the *Primary Chronicle*'s Christian compiler, who would find a horrible triple revenge more acceptable than a pagan funeral. From our point of view, if we accept that Ol'ga actually performed the triple revenge, it could have been a kind of ritual murder following the different steps of a Slavic pre-Christian funerary rite, taking the boat burial from the Scandinavian tradition.

In addition, the aforementioned three ritual actions can also be found in a symbolic way in Russian folk tales. Coming back to the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*, the cockerels' footprints left on the ashes of the bathhouse by the spirits of the dead, called *navĭę*, remind us very much of the house of Baba Yaga standing on chicken legs, but the parallelism goes further.[63] As Vladimir Propp[64] pointed out, the hero of some popular Russian fairy tales, usually called Ivan, comes into the house of Baba Yaga and takes the food and the bath that she offers him, because he wishes to die temporarily and gain access to the world of the dead, the "thirtieth kingdom," as it is called in the tales. Moreover, inside Baba Yaga's hut there is a huge cooking stove used to inflict a deadly punishment on children who fail to do the tasks that she orders. They are threatened with being burned and cooked alive in the stove and eaten by the witch.[65] The sorcerer herself bears the signs of the dead, with her bony leg and her blindness, being the gatekeeper of the other world, the "thirtieth kingdom."[66] In fact, her hut is nothing but the magic gate to the other world, being the symbolic representation of both the funeral pyre and of the cinerary urn. Therefore, the food and

60 See Funerary Banquet.

61 Koptev, "Ritual and History," 22n47.

62 Koptev, "Ritual and History," 49–50.

63 On the *navii* or the souls of the dead with the shape of birds in Bulgarian folklore, see Casas Olea, "Génesis y configuración del mito del vampiro en los Balcanes," 40.

64 Propp, *Istoricheskie korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 66–69.

65 Propp, *Istoricheskie korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 98–103.

66 Propp, *Istoricheskie korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 69–75.

bath of the stories of Baba Yaga, as well as the fire of the stove, would be a reminiscence of the funeral rituals of the ancient Slavic society that according to Propp were employed to perform an initiation ceremony or a rite of passage from youth to adulthood. This was embedded in a metaphorical way in fairy tales and implied the symbolic death of the children and their rebirth as adults prepared to become full members of the community with parallels in many cultures around the world.[67] This is similar to the Celtiberian warriors coming back from war and their rite of passage in the steam baths that we mentioned above. A conclusion that can be inferred from all this is that in the Slavic pre-Christian ideology, the dead had to accomplish all the steps of this ceremony or rite of passage if they wanted to cross the border between the world of the living and of the dead in both directions. Actually, the Slavs believed that the dead could appear among the living, although they had to do it in an appropriate and orderly manner to avoid being harmful, as we will see later.

Festivals to Honour the Dead

In the previous section we have seen a festivity to honour the dead attested by several sermons, such as the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*, that date back to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. It was called *Radunitsa* and coincided with the Christian Easter. Despite this, it involved disrespectful songs and dances, as well as excessive eating, drinking, and uninhibited sexual behaviour. Consequently, it was severely condemned by the homiletic and ecclesiastical literature because it violated compulsory fasting just before Easter. During this festival the East Slavs performed a curious ritual devoted to the spirits of the dead (*navii*) that could be called "the baths of the dead," as we commented above. In the fifteenth-century *Polish Sermons* (Fol. 142 b),[68] we have a striking coincidence of a food offering for the souls of the dead that are called *vbosshe*.[69] Specifically, this refers to the leftovers of the Holy Thursday meal, similar to the way it was done by the East Slavs during the *Radunitsa*, but without preparing baths for the dead.

Moreover, in Chapter 2 we said that there was another Slavic pre-Christian festivity to honour the dead called the *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia* by the East Slavs that coincided with the Christian Pentecost and also combined certain fertility rites. It should be noted that the two Slavic pre-Christian festivities to honour the dead, the *Radunitsa* and the *Rusalii*, took place during the spring, when nature comes back to life, unlike the Western European tradition where the cult of the dead is associated with autumn.

Further references to these festivities can be found as late as the sixteenth century in the *Stoglav*,[70] which we already mentioned in Chapter 2 when speaking of fertility rites.

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67 Propp, *Istoricheskie korni bolshebnoi skazki*, 92–93.

68 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 69–76.

69 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 230.

70 Ëmchenko, *Stoglav. Issledovanie i tekst*.

Specifically, allusions to the spring festivals can be found in questions 23 to 26 belonging to chapter 41:

> Question 23. On Trinity Saturday, in the villages and on the estates, men and women gather in the cemeteries and cry among the tombs with great wailing. And when the bards and the *gudki*[71] musicians begin to play, they themselves, putting their lamenting aside, begin to jump and dance and clap and sing satanic songs in these very cemeteries, the frivolous rogues. […]
> Question 25. And after the Great Day, the *okličkі* on the Radunicy, the *v'junec*[72] and all devilish acts performed therein. […]
> Question 26. And on the morning of Easter Thursday they burn straw and summon the dead; and on Easter Thursday some ignorant priests place salt under the altar and keep it there until the seventh Thursday after the Great Day, and they give this salt to heal men and beasts. […][73]

The rites referred to in question 23 are very similar to the pagan celebrations that Cosmas of Prague mentioned in his *Chronica Bohemorum* as well as the rites during the *Rusalia* described by Demetrios Chomatenos.[74] The same can be said regarding the *oklichki* during the *Radunitsa* of question 25, because *oklichki* was a popular tradition of heathen origin consisting in honouring the dead by means of funeral songs and laments on the graves. As for question 26, we can see how deeply rooted the pagan customs were, to the point that even priests participated in them. It recounts the "calling of the dead" burning straw during Holy Thursday, which is complementary to the "baths of the dead"[75] of the sermons from the thirteenth century. In addition, it should be noted that the word *oklichki* in question 25 means literally "callings." The custom of lighting bonfires in cemeteries on the eve of Good Friday or Holy Saturday was observed up until the twentieth century, which indicates how established the practice was and shows the complicity of some ecclesiastical authorities.[76] Moreover, the same custom among the Poles is described in the *Polish Sermons* written in the fifteenth century by Friar Michael of Janoviec,[77] who recounts how people used to light bonfires called *grumathky* on Holy Wednesday so that the souls of the dead could come and warm up.[78]

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71 Ancient Russian string instrument similar to a violin.

72 Ceremony with choirs and songs with which people used to congratulate the young spouses in the first spring after their wedding. For more information, see Propp, *Russkie agrarnye prazdniki*, 63–65.

73 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 431–32; Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 20.

74 See Chapter 2.

75 See The Baths of the Dead.

76 Bogatyrev, *Vampires in the Carpathians*, 68.

77 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 78–79.

78 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 246.

Finally, we must not forget an interesting festival devoted to the personification of Death among the West Slavs that is described in several Polish and Czech works. It took place "in the middle of Lent" according to the *Records from the Councils of Prague*[79] corresponding to the years 1366 and 1384, or more specifically during the fourth Sunday in the period of Lent, or "Laetare Sunday," as it is recounted by the *Annals* of Jan Długosz, canon priest of the cathedral of Krakow, and by the *Synodal Statutes* of Andreas Bninski, bishop of Poznań, both from the fifteenth century. In the *Records from the Councils of Prague*, it states that the people carried "images in the form of death" in procession outside the cities and villages and threw them into the river in the belief that this would save them from their own death.[80] Jan Długosz says that "in some towns a farce is still represented in which they worship Dzyewana and Marzyana[81] in the form of a long stick, which is thrown and sunk in swamps on *Laetare* Sunday."[82] Additionally, in the *Synodal Statutes* by Andreas Bninski[83] the following is found:

> 35. On the image of straw during fasting. On the Fourth Sunday of Easter, also called *Biała niedziela*,[84] you must prohibit anyone from practicing the superstitious custom of carrying in procession an image that they call "death" and then throwing it in the mud, because acts of this nature are not free from the suspicion of superstition.[85]

Krappe[86] has associated these spring festivals combining both fertility rites and the cult of the dead with the way Prince Vladimir of Kiev destroyed the idol of Perun in Kiev after his baptism in 988: throwing it into the river Dnieper.[87] Something similar is attested by Jan Długosz about Prince Mieszko of Poland and his destruction of the idols after the Christianization of his kingdom in 965.[88] This way, according to Krappe,[89] Prince Vladimir (and Prince Mieszko too) would be taking advantage of a known pre-Christian ritual in order to disguise the destruction of the idols, making it easier to assimilate by their respective peoples.

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79 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 63–64.

80 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 218.

81 These could be two female deities related to Death: Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 74–76.

82 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 226.

83 Meyer, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, 77–78.

84 "White Sunday" in Polish.

85 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 245.

86 Krappe, "La chute du paganisme à Kiev," 212–18.

87 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 281.

88 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 225–26.

89 Krappe, "La chute du paganisme à Kiev," 217.

Self-immolation of the Warriors

There are other sacrifices whose interpretation is more controversial, because they are attested among the East Slavs in the historical period when the trade routes of the big rivers of Eastern Europe were controlled by the Scandinavian military elites who ruled over the first East Slavic state, the Kievan Rus', during its formation between the ninth and tenth centuries. We cannot thus be completely sure regarding the origin of the rituals described. We do not know whether they were restricted to the Scandinavian elite, called in the texts Varangian or *Rus'*, whether they were Slavic ceremonies that coincided with Scandinavian rites due to their common Indo-European tradition, or whether they had a Scandinavian origin and had been assimilated by the East Slavic elite as their own.

The first of these rites is the self-immolation of warriors to avoid becoming servants and slaves in the afterlife. If the ritual belonged to the Scandinavian elite, self-immolation would be necessary to enter Valhalla. However, slavery in the afterlife could be a condition that is part of the Slavic eschatological conception, as the self-execrations that we will comment on later would confirm. The problem is therefore not easy to solve. The specific text is transmitted by Leo the Deacon in his *History*.[90] He explains the reasons for the strange behaviour of the *Rus'* combatants when narrating the battles of the Byzantine army with the Kievan Prince Svyatoslav's troops:[91]

Leo the Deacon, *History* 9.8:

> This also is said about the Tauroscythians,[92] that never up until now had they surrendered to the enemy when defeated; but when they lose hope of safety, they drive their swords into their vital parts and kill themselves. And they do this because of the following belief: they say that if they are killed in battle by the enemy, then after their death and the separation of their souls from their bodies they will serve their slayers in Hades. And the Tauroscythians dread such servitude, and, hating to wait upon those who have killed them, inflict death upon themselves with their own hands. Such is the belief that prevails among them.[93]

The Ritual Described by Ibn Faḍlān

The most famous text in which a funerary ritual of a chieftain of the *Rūsiyyah* settled by the river Volga is described has been conveyed by the tenth century Arab traveller Ahmad Ibn Fadlān in his *Kitāb ilā Mulk al-Saqāliba* (*Book for the Owners of Scalivia*),[94]

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90 Karalis, *Λεών Διάκονος. Ιστορία*.

91 See Cremation.

92 That is, *Rus'*, whom Leo calls in his work Scythians, Tauroscythians and Tauroi, following a former Greek literary tradition.

93 Talbot and Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 195; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 44.

94 Wüstenfeld, "Risāla Ibn Faḍlān," 79–83.

who visited that area as an envoy of the embassy of Caliph al-Muqtadir in 921. However, there is a wide consensus that considers that the text recounts the burial of a Scandinavian (Varangian) chieftain.[95] The details of the lengthy text would confirm such an interpretation: the placing of the corpse in a boat, the drug-induced vision of the slave-girl destined to be sacrificed, the description of the other world as a green field, the function of the crone known as "Angel of Death" who performs the slave girl's sacrifice, and the burning of the boat with all the victims who accompany the chieftain on his journey to the other world.[96] In any case, the interpretation is the same as for the sacrifice of widows: the warrior's most valuable belongings are offered so that he can take them with him to the afterlife.

Nevertheless, there is a contemporary testimony from Ibn Rustah's *Book of Precious Gems* regarding the customs of the *Rus'* that curiously does not include the cremation and the boat, but still contains the sacrifice of the widow. It reads as follows:

> When an important man among them dies, they dig him a grave like a spacious house and they lay him inside, including with him clothing for his body, an armband of gold, in which he used to dress, as well as a quantity of food and drink and coins. And they place his woman whom he loved in the grave with him while she is alive. They close the lid of the grave on her and she perishes inside.[97]

It is surprising, especially if we bear in mind that the *Rus'* belong to the Scandinavian culture, where cremation was a well-known burial custom, and moreover if we consider Ibn Fadlān's account.

The Oath of Self-execration of the Warriors

Additional information regarding the ritual of self-immolation of warriors is provided by the oath of self-execration, according to which whoever breaks the oath will live in the afterlife as a slave. This idea is linked to the eternal slavery of those defeated in battle as conveyed by Leo the Deacon.[98] It is not clear either whether it is Slavic or Scandinavian, being a part of the self-execration formulas belonging to the peace treaties between *Rus'* and Byzantines contained in the *PVL*, and specifically in the third Treaty of *Rus'* during the rule of Prince Igor of Kiev in 945. The Treaty contains a set of self-execration

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95 On the Normanist versus anti-Normanist controversy on the testimony of Ibn Faḍlān, see Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 1–25. Cf. Lajoye, "Les Rous d'Ibn Fadlân: Slaves ou Scandinaves? Une approche critique," 155–63.

96 Vries, *Altgermanische Religiongeschichte*, 153–54. For the English translation, see Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," 1–25; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 462–65.

97 Watson, "Ibn Rustah's Book of Precious Things," 289–99; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 457.

98 See Self-immolation of the Warriors.

formulas to guarantee the accomplishment of the agreement that includes the threat of being killed by their own swords, arrows and weapons, of not being able to defend themselves with their own shields, as well as of becoming slaves in the future life:

> If any inhabitant of the land of Rus' thinks to violate this amity, may such of these transgressors as have adopted the Christian faith incur condign punishment from Almighty God in the shape of damnation and destruction forevermore. If any of these transgressors be not baptized, may they receive help neither from God nor from Perun:[99] may they not be protected by their own shields, but may they rather be slain by their own swords, laid low by their own arrows or by any of their own weapons, and may they be in bondage forever.[100]

The reproductions of the second and third treaties between *Rus'* and Byzantines are probably the most reliable texts of the *PVL*, because it is very likely that the compiler could have had access to the original version of the treaty.[101] The explicit allusion to the supreme deity of the East Slavs, Perun, makes this text even more reliable, for it is earlier than the establishment of Prince Vladimir's pantheon in Kiev. Therefore, it can be taken as a reference to the possibility that in the afterlife of the Slavs, the divisions between masters and slaves could be perpetuated, and as a consequence that it would be a reflection of the world of the living. In addition, it removes the doubts regarding the Slavic origin of the custom described in the testimony of Leo the Deacon.

The Change of the Funerary Ritual and the Appearance of the Restless Dead in the Slavic Cultural Realm

Slavic Vampires

A widespread idea among many scholars and the public in general is that the figure of the living dead and its most famous variant, with very negative connotations, the vampire, is a cultural feature that is typically Slavic and in particular Balkanic and East Slavic.[102] On the contrary, we believe that the figure of the living dead, with positive and negative aspects, is present in numerous ancient traditions. Specifically, we will analyze it in the framework of a wider European context, within the domain of the Indo-European tradition, both late antique and medieval. The positive or negative characteristics of the living dead are related to a sociological explanation, as we will see.

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99 Supreme god and god of thunder and lightning among the East Slavs.

100 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 74; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 273.

101 Malingoudi, *Die russische-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jahrhunderts aus diplomatischer Sicht.*

102 For a survey on the creation of the myth of the vampire in the Balkans, see Casas Olea "Génesis y configuración del mito del vampiro en los Balcanes," 35–53; for a study of the Slavic vampire myth in Russian literature, see Townsend, *From Upyr' to Vampire: The Slavic Vampire Myth in Russian Literature*.

The Living Dead among the East Slavs

Since Wienecke,[103] the term *lebende Leichnam* (living dead) has been employed in order to define the Slavs' conception of the deceased. It means that for them, the soul of the dead had a material entity, sometimes even corporeal, that continued to have physiological necessities and links to the living. Somehow, it could be said that the survival of the soul for the ancient Slavs did not take place in an afterlife or in another world but in this very world. Therefore, in the Slavic tradition, all the dead come back; they are all revenants. Of course, this return had to be organized so that it could be beneficial for the living, being regulated by certain precise rituals and taking place at certain specific times of the year. We have already seen the case of the "baths of the dead" during the *Radunitsa* festival.[104] In contrast, they will become harmful and negative, as we will analyze later.

Among the East Slavs, the spirits of the returning dead were called *navĭę*[105] in several sermons dating back to the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century, such as the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant, on the Monday of the Second Week*.[106] In a contemporary sermon, the *Sermon by Saint Gregory*,[107] the name of the other variant for the living dead, the *upiry* (vampires), can be found for the first time:

> Whence the Hellenes became accustomed to offer sacrifices to Artemid and Artemis, that is to say *rod* and *rozhanitsa*, and so also the Egyptians, thus also to the Slavs this came. These Slavs also began to hold rites to *rod* and *rozhanitsy*, at first Perun was their god and before that they held rites to *upiry* [vampires?] and *bereginy* [river-bank spirits?]. By holy baptism they rejected Perun, and accepted Christ as God. But now also on the outskirts they pray to him, to the accursed god Perun, and Khors, and Mokosh, and *vily*, and this they do in secret and they cannot give this up.[108]

As Stella Rock[109] remarked, this sermon could be either a copy of parts of an earlier translated South Slavic version with additional commentary, or a translation of parts of Saint Gregory the Theologian's sermon *On the Epiphany*, with a commentary. In this fragment, in addition to other pre-Christian deities, *upiry* (vampires) are mentioned together with *bereginy* that are identified as river-bank spirits, as Stella Rock indicated in her translation. In the text, it is said that the Slavs performed rites to *upiry* and

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103 Wienecke, *Untersuchungen zur Religion der Westslawen*, 96.

104 See The Baths of the Dead and Festivals to Honour the Dead.

105 This word would come from Proto-Indo-European **nāu-s-* (ship, boat), and therefore it would refer to the vessel that transported souls to the afterworld: Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, 724. For a commentary on the *navie*, see Zochios, "Slavic Deities of Death," 71–73.

106 See The Baths of the Dead.

107 The full title is: *Sermon by Saint Gregory, Found in the Comments, on How the Ancient Nations, When Pagan, Worshipped Idols and Offered Sacrifices to Them, and Continue to Do So Now*. Ed. by Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 22–25.

108 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 28; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 366n282.

109 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia*, 26.

bereginy. However, no further information is given about what those rites entailed. In addition, in a contemporary sermon, the *Sermon by Saint John Chrysostom*,[110] *upiry* are again associated with *bereginy*, who are said to be "three times nine sisters" and to be offered the sacrifice of roosters. *Bereginy* are mentioned again with different natural elements that are worshipped by heathens and even by "those who called themselves Christians," such as fire, stones, rivers, fountains and trees. Therefore, it may be inferred that *bereginy* were also a kind of natural deities, and that *upiry* combined the cult to the natural elements and the cult to the dead. The name of *bereginy* could come from the Old Russian words *beregŭ* (river bank) or *beregit'* (to keep), so it could refer either to the place where they were found or to the agent name "guardians."[111] Regarding the etymology of *upiry*, we do not yet have a satisfactory explanation.[112] The only thing on which scholars agree is that the term is ancient and is found in all the Slavic languages.[113] It seems plausible that its transfer into other European languages took place between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through a literary written intermediary, and possibly via the German loanword *Vampir*, which would come from the homonymous Serbian form.[114]

As for the sacrifice of roosters, it appears in different texts and contexts. However, specifically as a funerary rite we saw it in the testimony of Leo the Deacon[115] regarding the offering of victims (suckling infants and chickens) to the river Danube during the funerals for the dead warriors at the time of Prince Svyatoslav's campaign in Bulgaria between 969 and 971. Although we do not know the exact reason for the offering of roosters or chickens, this bird is associated to the daylight and the cult of the sun, announcing with its crowing the coming of day and the end of night and darkness. Moreover, they remind us of the cockerels' footprints left on the ashes of the bathhouse by the visiting spirits of the dead known as *navĭę* during the "baths of the dead" as recounted in the *Sermon on Fasting for the Ignorant*.[116]

The sacrifice of roosters or cockerels appeared again in the *Sermon by One Who Loves Christ and Is a Jealous Defender of the Righteous Faith*, but this time related to *vily*, as

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110 The full title is: *Sermon by the Holy Father Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on How the First Pagans Believed in Idols.* Ed. by Gal'kovskii, *Bor'ba khristianstva*, 59–61.

111 Dynda, "Rusalki," 86, n. 7.

112 There are several hypotheses gathered by Vasmer, *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, III, 186. On the one hand, there are a few authors who suggest a foreign origin, coming from Hungarian or Greek, or even from the Tatar *ubyr* (witch), and on the other hand, the majority of authors propose a patrimonial Slavic origin, identifying the form *-pyrĭ* with the root of *pŭrati, pariti* (to fly) and *pero* (feather), as well as with *netopyr'* (bat) that would mean literally "the one who flies at night." But this is not clear at all.

113 Serbo-Croatian *vampire*, Bosnian *lampir*, Bulgarian *vampir, văpir*, Ukrainian *upyr'*, Belarusian *upyr,* Russian *upyr'*, Czech and Slovak *upír*, Polish *wąpierz, upiór*, Kashubian *wupji, lupi*.

114 Dundes, *The Vampire: A Casebook*, 3–11.

115 See Cremation.

116 See The Baths of the Dead.

we saw in the passage quoted in Chapter 2 dealing with fertility rites.[117] Here *vily* were mentioned together with other deities, as in the *Sermon by Saint Gregory*, but play the role of *bereginy* as in the *Sermon by Saint John Chrysostom*, repeating the number "three times nine sisters" (thirty in another variant) and receiving the offering of sacrifices of cockerels. *Vily* are attested also with this name as female spirits of nature among the Western and Southern Slavs.[118]

The oldest testimony of the worship of nature spirits connected with divination among the Southern Slavs can be found in Procopius' *Gothic War* (*Bell. Goth.* 3.14.23), as we have seen already in the chapter dealing with everyday life rituals. According to Procopius, "they make their divinations in connection with these sacrifices,"[119] so it would be possible to identify these sacrifices with the offerings of roosters to the *vily* and *bereginy* in the East Slavic sermons. Procopius mentioned the "rivers, nymphs and other spirits,"[120] calling them by their Greek names, but they could be identified with the water spirits *vily* and *bereginy*.

Later, among the East Slavs, these nature deities were assimilated by other creatures belonging to the East Slavic folklore considered by several authors[121] as the female counterparts of the restless dead: *rusalki.* However, as Dynda[122] remarked, they are much more than this. Most authors agree in considering that the name of *rusalki* is derived from the festival known as *Rusal'naia nedelia*.[123] As we have seen already, it was a spring festival devoted to the dead that also included agrarian rites.[124] It usually fell on the Thursday of the so-called Green Week (better known as Trinity Week in Russia and the Whitsuntide week in Britain). However, it started on the eve of Pentecost and finished one week later on the eve of Trinity Sunday. As Dynda[125] reminds,

> *rusalki* are souls of maidens who died an untimely and often unnatural death, or of those who died in the liminal period between betrothal and marriage. Ultimately, there are some hints that any woman who did not marry, i.e. did not fulfil her life role, had the potential to become *rusalka* following her death.

Therefore, *rusalki* included all of the elements that characterize the restless dead, and in this shape, they could be either a benefit or a hazard for humans. They were believed to attract careless men to the lakes, rivers, ponds or swamps where they lived, causing their death. Moreover, as we have seen already, similar to other "unclean dead" or to the

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117 See Svarozhich.

118 Niederle, *Slovanské Starožitnosti*, 53–64; Jurić, *Treatise on the South Slavic Vila*, 15–19.

119 Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 271.

120 *kaì potamoús te kaì nýmphas kaì álla átta daimónia*, see Dewing, *Procopius in Seven Volumes*, 270.24–25.

121 Dynda, "Rusalki," 83–109; Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*; Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii.*

122 Dynda, "Rusalki," 89.

123 Dynda, "Rusalki," 86; Miklosich, *Die Rusalien*, 7.

124 See Festivals to Honour the Dead.

125 Dynda, "Rusalki," 88–89.

souls of the dead called *navii*, they were thought to have power over natural phenomena as well as over the fertility of the earth.[126] As a consequence, they needed to receive a special kind of offerings and to celebrate specific rituals during a specific period of time in order to be pleased and not do harm to the living. If the *Radunitsa* coinciding with Holy Week was the time devoted to the *navii* and the "baths of the dead," Pentecost and Trinity Sunday during the *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia* was the moment when *rusalki* could appear to humans. Actually, these creatures played an important role in the rites of the festival, though they are not mentioned explicitly by the texts. It is only said[127] that the first Monday of Saint Peter's Fast, that is, after Trinity Sunday, people would go to the forest and to the springs, places associated to *rusalki*, and perform demonic amusements.[128] This date marked the end of the *rusalki*'s period of influence, and it was accompanied with a very special farewell ceremony in the villages, including parades of girls dressed as *rusalki*.[129]

The celebration of all these festivals and rituals ensured that these supernatural entities would be favourable for humans. Otherwise, they could bring negative and destructive consequences for the fertility of the earth. We can find a good example in a legend from the region of the river Onega, according to which during the *Smutnoye Vremya*[130] (Time of Troubles), some Polish soldiers called *pani* (lords) had died on Russian soil. Subsequently, every year during the festivity of *Semik*, the people of the region used to gather by the clock tower and take the *kisel'*[131] to keep those dead men calm. One year they forgot to perform the ritual and there was a bad harvest. Since then, they never forget to calm the wicked *pani* through offerings.[132] Moreover, these dead warriors have the additional problem of being foreigners and enemies that have been killed far from their homes, and whose remains do not rest in their fatherland. Another example is to be found in the sixteenth-century epistle of Maxim "the Greek"[133] dealing with the superstitious belief on the alleged harmful effect that the burial of those who have drowned or have been murdered is thought to have on the fertility of earth.[134] According to this work, if freezing winds flow during spring, then, "if we know that a

126 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 79–81.

127 For example in question 27 belonging to chapter 41 of the *Stoglav*.

128 Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 432–33.

129 Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 80.

130 Period of political crisis and instability in the Muscovian state between the demise of the Riurikid dynasty in 1598 and the establishment of the Romanov dynasty in 1613.

131 Drink made of forest fruits or grains.

132 Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii,* 133; Casas Olea, "Génesis y configuración del mito del vampiro en los Balcanes," 42.

133 Greek humanist called Michael Trivolis, later known in Russia as Maxim the Greek, was a monk from the monastery Vatopedi in Mount Athos, who in 1518 was sent to Moscow at the request of Grand Prince Vasilii III, who needed a learned translator. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, 392.

134 Maksim Grek, *Sochineniya prepodobnogo Maksima Greka*, 170–71.

man who had either drowned or been murdered recently has been buried, we exhume the damned man [...] and abandon him in a distant place."[135] Therefore, in both examples the deceased had a problematic death, or lacked the appropriate funerary rites.

Living Dead among the West Slavs

But as we said at the beginning, the testimonies regarding the living dead are not limited to South or East Slavs. We also have an interesting source on restless dead among the West Slavs. The oldest accounts of this figure of the living dead or restless dead[136] among the West Slavs can be found in a fourteenth-century work by Jan Neplach, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Opatovice, *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae*, which was written between the years 1360 and 1365 and recounts the history of Bohemia until 1346.[137] This work has the monastic chronicles as literary models, for it gathers in an analytic way the anecdotes and historical data that were relevant for the local history of the Bohemian kingdom. There are two interesting passages that refer to the years 1336 and 1344 respectively, and they read as follows:

> Jan Neplach, *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae, sub anno* 1336: In Bohemia near Cadanus[138] a league from a village called Blau[139] a certain shepherd called Myslata died. Rising every night he made the rounds of the villages and spoke to people, terrifying and killing them. And while he was being impaled with a stake, he said, "They injured me severely, when they gave me a stick with which to defend myself from dogs." And when he was being exhumed for cremation, he had swelled like an ox and bellowed in a dreadful manner. And when he was placed in the fire, someone, seizing a stake, drove it in him and immediately blood burst forth as from a vessel. Moreover, when he was exhumed and placed on a vehicle, he drew in his feet as if alive, and when he was cremated, all the evil ceased, and before he was cremated, whomever he called by name at night died within eight days.[140]
>
> Jan Neplach, *Summula Chronicae tam Romanae quam Bohemicae, sub anno* 1344: AD 1344 a certain woman died in Lewin [Levin] and was buried. After her burial she rose and killed many, and ran after whomever she pleased. And when she was transfixed [impaled], blood flowed as if from a living animal. She had devoured more than half of her shroud, and when it was extracted, it was covered completely in blood. When she was to be cremated, the wood could not be set alight unless, according to the instruction of

135 Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii*, 93.

136 Also is employed the French term *revenant*.

137 Emler, *Iohannis Neplachonis Chronicon*, 451–84. Passages commented on here, analyzed as manifestations of vampirism, can be found too in Perkowski, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*, and Svobodová "Dva prípady vampyrismu v Neplachove kronice," 571–77.

138 Kadaň.

139 Blov.

140 Perkowski, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*, 105; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 216.

> some old women, it was made from the roof of a church. After she had been impaled, she always kept rising, but when she was cremated, all evil subsided.[141]

Both texts present common elements: the main characters of both accounts are people who live on the margins of society. It is clear in the case of the shepherd from Blov and it is most probable for the woman of Levin. It was even possible that this woman was a witch during her life, though in the text it is not stated explicitly. In any case, the fact of being a woman placed her already in a very marginal position in the medieval society of Central Europe. Both deceased become restless dead and harm the living. The bodies bleed (the shepherd's even draws his feet in) as if they were alive, in what is considered one of the main characteristics of the living dead. Additionally, there are some details that provide very interesting information. The shepherd from Blov died a league from the village. That is, he died without Christian confession, or it may even have been a violent or accidental death. The woman from Levin was hungry in her grave, devouring her own shroud.[142] The solution for the problem of both revenants is similar, though the woman from Levin requires more extreme actions. In both cases a first attempt is made to transfix the corpses with stakes. This fails and subsequently they are cremated, which proves to be the effective solution, with the peculiarity that the woman needs to be burned with sacred wood taken from the village church.

Another invisible and incorporeal variant of the spirits of the dead, similar to the East Slavic *navii*, can also be found among the West Slavs. As we already mentioned in Chapter 2, Thietmar of Merseburg in his *Chronicon* (VII, 68)[143] narrates the following episode of a haunted house in 1017:

> 68. In my neighbourhood, in a place called Sülfeld,[144] a miracle occurred in the second week of December. A certain woman there had barred herself and her children in her house, because her husband was not at home. Behold, just before the rooster crowed, she heard a loud noise. Horrified by this intrusion, she cried out to her neighbours and indicated that she needed help. When the neighbours rushed to her aid, however, they were repeatedly thrown back by some force. Finally, breaking down the doors, they entered with drawn swords and diligently searched for whatever had attacked the mistress of the house, and them as well. Because of its supernatural character, however, this enemy could not be discovered. The searchers went away, disheartened, while the woman anxiously awaited the break of the day. In the morning, she fetched the closest priest who purified the entire house with the relics of saints and consecrated water. During the following night, she was assailed by the same terror, but to a much lesser extent. Thanks be God, repeated visits by the priest freed her from it completely.[145]

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141 Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 97–98; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 217.

142 Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 113–14.

143 Holtzmann, *Thietmari Merseburgensis*, 482.

144 Village belonging to Lower Saxony, in modern Germany.

145 Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, 355.

The invisible supernatural force described here that does not allow the neighbours to enter the house reminds us very much of the strange phenomena of ghosts and evil spirits that surrounded the idol of Veles which was destroyed by St. Abraham of Rostov with the help of the staff that St. John the Evangelist had given to him, as narrated in the former's hagiography.[146] The problem of the haunted house is solved in Thietmar's account by means of a traditional Christian exorcism with the relics of saints and consecrated water.

The Aggressiveness of the Living Dead

The identification of the anecdotes gathered by abbot Neplach with cases of vampirism would integrate those testimonies within the Slavic vampirism that, according to the theory of "binary stratification," would appear as the result of the superposition of two fundamental ideological strata: on the one hand, a pre-Christian stratum, where the belief in an aggressive living dead that could be identified with the vampire pre-existed, in Common Slavic *upyr'*, and on the other hand, a Christian stratum, which would appear as a forced innovation and conflict with the traditional pre-Christian ideology.[147] In our opinion, the theory of binary stratification is based on the *petitio principii* of the oldest antiquity of the category of the aggressive living dead and of its specifically Slavic character. On the contrary, the figure of the living dead is not necessarily aggressive and it is not restricted to the Slavic realm, for one of the arguments supporting the antiquity of Slavic vampirism would decay.

An example of the ambivalent character of the Slavic living dead can be found among the East Slavic *navii*. We have seen already how during the spring festival known as *Radunitsa*, the East Slavs prepared the "baths for the dead," in which the souls of the dead called *navii* were believed to visit the living.[148] This is an example of a peaceful visit of the living dead, following an organized ritual with that aim. However, there is also a testimony of a harmful and extremely aggressive visit of the *navii* among the East Slavs. It can be found in the *PVL*, which describes a massive ghostly apparition that would have taken place in the city of Polotsk in the year 1092 in the context of a surge of omens and signs that would announce the imminent end of the world. This incident is recounted as follows:

> An extraordinary event occurred at Polotsk. At night there was heard a clatter and a groaning in the streets, and demons ran about like men. If any citizen went forth from his house to look upon them, he was wounded straightway by some invisible demon, and so many perished from such wounds that the people dared no longer leave their houses. The demons later began to appear on horseback during the day. They were not visible themselves, but the hoofs of their horses could be seen. Thus they did injury to

146 See Funerary Banquet.

147 On the theory of "binary stratification," see Uspenskii and Lotman, *Semiotika istorii. Semiotika kul'tury*.

148 See The Baths of the Dead.

> the people of Polotsk and the vicinity, so that it was commonly said that ghosts were killing the people of Polotsk. This portent had its beginning in Dryutesk. At this time, a sign appeared in the heavens like a huge circle in the midst of the sky. There was a drought in this year, so that the earth was burned over, and many pine forests and peat-bogs were consumed. There were many portents in various localities, and incursions of the Polovcians were reported from all quarters.[149]

We are faced here with a violent apparition of the *navii*, as they are called in the original,[150] the souls of the dead that seemed to be peaceful while they were visiting the houses of the living and were taking their drinks, foods and baths. However, they share some features with them: they are invisible and only the footprints that they leave can be seen, in this case the hoofs of their horses. But unlike the other, these *navii* inflicted mortal wounds. The key to this behaviour can be found in the last sentences. In addition to the apocalyptic context, this apparition coincides with several violent attacks launched by the Polovtsians, a nomadic people of Turkic origin that came from the steppes of Central Asia, invading the territory of Kievan Rus' in 1068. Similar to the legend of the Polish *pani*,[151] here we have a foreign invading host that dies in enemy land after having killed many natives. They fulfil all of the conditions to become harmful restless dead, the ghostly army being a reflection of the invading troops, though they were far away. In addition, we can find one of the negative effects typical of the restless dead among the apocalyptic signs: that year there was a severe drought, as well as many fires, that is, a negative influence on nature and the fertility of earth. Only two years earlier, in the same *PVL* the arrival at Kiev from Constantinople of another *navie* was reported, an alleged living dead, though this time peaceful:

> In this year [1090], Yanka, the above-mentioned daughter of Vsevolod,[152] went to Greece. She brought back the Metropolitan John, a eunuch, and when the people saw him, they exclaimed, "A ghost[153] has come." After staying a year in Kiev, he too died. He was not a learned man, but frank and simple in character.[154]

In this case, the Kievan's identification of the new Greek Metropolitan with the living dead made may be because the man was a eunuch, that is, a disabled person in his sexual reproductive function, something that could have been confirmed in their eyes with the Metropolitan's early death.

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149 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 173–74; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 293.

150 Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The "Povĕst' vremennykh lĕt": An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, col. 215, 6.

151 See The Change of the Funerary Rite and the Origin of the Living Dead.

152 Vsevolod I Yaroslavich, Grand Prince of Kiev (1078–1093).

153 *Navie* in the original text: Ostrowski, Birnbaum and Lunt, *The "Povĕst' vremennykh lĕt": An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, 208, 17.

154 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 170; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 291.

Just like other aspects of the Slavic pre-Christian religion, the aggressive apparition of the living dead is not unique. On the contrary, the violent attack of *navii* in Polotsk as recounted in the *PVL* would be an early example of the phenomenon known in French as *chasse sauvage* (Wild Hunt). Many examples of this supernatural event can be found in medieval Western European literature; this tradition goes back to the Germanic and Scandinavian myths. The legend of the ghostly host is known in medieval French literature as *Menée Hellequin* and appears for the first time in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written by Orderic Vitalis[155] in the early twelfth century. This host Hellequin probably takes its name from the Germanic terms *Heer* (army) and *thing* (retinue of armed free men).[156] The oldest mention of this myth, though rather obscure, is identified in an account of the *Harii* that fought at night taking the shape of an army of ghosts, belonging to the *Germania* of Tacitus.[157] Moreover, there are numerous testimonies in the *Sagas of the Icelanders* on aggressive living dead or *draugr*[158] that confirm the existence of such a belief in Scandinavia since pre-Christian times and a long coexistence during the period of Christianization. It is not, therefore, a phenomenon restricted to the Slavs; it has counterparts in central and northern Europe.

Similarly, there are many records of appearances of non-violent living dead outside the Slavic domain. For instance, there is an anecdote told by Caesarius of Heisterbach in his thirteenth-century work *Dialogus miraculorum* (11.36) to instruct the young monks on the importance of wearing the cowl at the moment of death. It tells the story of a pious French monk who had to return from death in order to properly put on his cowl, which he had taken off just before he died.[159] Therefore, there are many stories that suggest that the aggressiveness of the returning dead is not a compulsory feature, and that all of the revenants do not have to be identified with vampires, as the theory of binary stratification argues.

The Change of the Funerary Rite and the Origin of the Living Dead

A theory that we could define as "ritualistic," which highlights the importance of ritual for pre-Christian religions, suggests that the living dead could have originated in the change in the model of the funerary ritual, from cremation to inhumation. This seems very clear for the West Slavs in the cases of the shepherd Myslata of Blov and the woman of Levin, as recounted by Jan Neplach in his *Summula Chronicae*, where the only way to

155 Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 93–94.

156 Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 100.

157 Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 100.

158 Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead*; Noetzel, "Outlaws and the Undead: Defining Sacred and Communal Space in Medieval Iceland," 175–200.

159 Strange, *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Dialogus miraculorum II*, 298; Álvarez-Pedrosa, "Dos muertos vivientes en la Bohemia del siglo XIV. Aspectos comparativos, rituales y sociales," 148. On the importance of Caesarius of Heisterbach on the history of the living dead, see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 127–33.

terminate evil and stop the restless dead was cremation, returning to the former pre-Christian funerary ritual. An example of a preventive action, although not that evident, can be found among the East Slavs in a passage of the *PVL* that relates the funerary ritual of Prince Vladimir of Kiev after his death in 1015:

> For when Vladimir fell ill, Boris was with him at the time. Since the Pechenegs were attacking the Russes, he sent Boris out against them, for he himself was very sick, and of this illness he died on July 15. Now he died at Berestovo, but his death was kept secret, for Svyatopolk was in Kiev. But at night his companions took up the flooring between two rooms, and after wrapping the body in a rug, they let it down to the earth with ropes. After they had placed it upon a sledge, they took it away and laid it in the Church of the Virgin that Vladimir himself had built.[160]

It would be hard to explain this strange funerary ritual performed with Prince Vladimir's body if we dismiss the Slavic pre-Christian rites, something really shocking if we remember that Vladimir was the first Kievan ruler to be officially baptized in 988, converting his kingdom to the Christian faith. First, the hole that is drilled in the floor between two chambers in order to remove the prince's corpse could have been to confound the deceased. This can be linked to the custom of removing a body through a hole made for that purpose, which in Belarusian is called *dušnik*.[161] The aim of this was to disorient the souls of the dead to prevent them from returning home and becoming vampires or harmful dead. Second, placing the corpse on a sledge is highly symbolic, especially if we bear in mind that when Prince Vladimir died, on July 15 according to the *PVL*, there was no snow at all. Therefore, the sledge can be interpreted as a symbolic means of transport of the soul of the deceased to the other world, the same as the boat for the Vikings. That is supported by other testimonies that can be found in the same *PVL*, for instance, the sledge where the body of Prince Izyaslav of Kiev was placed after being killed in a battle against the troops of his nephews Oleg Svyatoslavich and Boris Vyacheslavich in 1078,[162] or the words of Prince Vladimir Monomakh in his *Pouchenie* (Instruction or Testament), written shortly before the prince's death 1125, when he says the following:

> "As I sat upon my sledge, I meditated in my heart and praised God, who has led me, a sinner, even to this day. […] If this document displeases anyone, let him not be angry, but rather let him believe that, in my old age, I talked nonsense as I sat upon my sledge."[163]

The words "as I sat upon my sledge" could be understood in a metaphorical sense as the prince was feeling his own death approach. In addition, there is the archaeological evidence of burned sledges in one of the burials of the area of Kostroma.[164] Finally, the

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160 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 124; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 282.

161 Váňa, *Svět slovanských bohů a démonů*,134.

162 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 166.

163 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 206.

164 Likhachëv, *Povest' vremennykh let, chast' vtoraya*, 357.

wrapping of the body in a rug seems to be one of the many techniques used to immobilize the corpse to prevent it from rising. These practices have been attested in archaeological excavations throughout Europe,[165] the most famous of which was the transfixion with a stake, whose real aim would be to fix the dead to the ground so as not to rise again. The wrapping of Vladimir's corpse reminds us of how Prince Vasil'ko of Terebovl' was raised and placed in a rug on a cart after being blinded with a knife and left for dead in 1097, during the internecine war between the members of the Rurikid dynasty, as is recounted in the *PVL*.[166]

This kind of extreme and shocking funerary rites were performed on specific people suspected of becoming restless dead. They have been summarized very well by Dynda:[167]

> (1) those who had met unnatural, violent, or unexpected deaths (people drowned, lost in the forest, frozen to death, fallen into a swamp, assassinated by someone); (2) those who committed suicide, regardless of the manner of death they chose (*samoubijcy*); (3) those who died during a liminal period of their lives, that is, above all, the unbaptized children (*nekreščenie deti*), or miscarried foetuses (*poterčata*), and also young people deceased, for example, just before their wedding or initiation; (4) those who were believed or suspected to be witches, sorcerers, and vampires even when they were alive. (i.e. socially determined unclean dead; cf. Warner 2000)

However, Prince Vladimir I of Kiev does not fit into any of these categories. Thus, the preventive measures could be due to his problematic life as a pagan, which included fratricide, rape, incest and polygamy, together with his relatively recent baptism.

Actually, all the testimonies on how to deal with the restless dead belong to the period that followed the Christianization of the Slavs, but never to the former pre-Christian times. This aspect is relevant, for it seems to confirm that those living dead were a result of a problem with the funerary ritual of inhumation that, as we have seen, was completely new for the Slavs, who adopted it after their conversion to the Christian faith.[168] This ritual shift affected not only the Slavs but also the Germanic peoples, among others.[169]

The importance of cremation as a suitable funerary ritual has a peculiar appearance in diverse stories of revenants: the fiery revenants, who somehow clamour for the ancient ritual of cremation. There are several accounts of revenants that appear enveloped in flames or wearing fiery garments. Medieval tradition makes them messengers of the punishments of hell and purgatory, but this is most likely a Christian reinterpretation.

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165 Stülzebach, "Vampir- und Wiedergängererscheinungen aus volkskundlicher und archäologischer Sicht," 97–121.

166 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 190; Álvarez-Pedrosa, *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 293–94.

167 Dynda, "Rusalki," 88.

168 Cremation was only replaced by inhumation after the Christianization of the different Slavic peoples: Conte, *Les slaves,* 164; Barford, *The Early Slavs*, 200–208; Holzer, "Gli slavi prima del loro arrivo in occidente," 23.

169 Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead*.

For instance, there is a passage in chapter 163 of the most famous work on medieval Western European hagiography, the *Golden Legend*, [170] that exemplifies the reasons for the Commemoration of All Souls. It explains how a dead disciple visited his Parisian teacher, chancellor Silo, in order to show him his penance in purgatory, wearing a coat made of burning parchment, a drop of incandescent sweat dripping onto his former teacher's hand.[171] We have found a probable variant of those fiery revenants among the East Slavs in the figure of two saints believed to have performed posthumous miracles related to fire: the martyred Princes Boris and Gleb, Prince Vladimir's sons who were killed by their half-brother Svyatopolk in the struggle for power that followed Vladimir's death in 1015. They were the first East Slavic saints canonized in the Kievan Rus' already in 1072, and their cult became a way to legitimate the Christian faith as well as the reigning dynasty. In their honour two hagiographies were written: the *Narrative and Passion and Encomium of the Holy Martyrs Boris and Gleb*, and the *Lection on the Life and Assassination of the Blessed Passion Sufferers Boris and Gleb*.[172] The question regarding the date of their composition and their relationship with the account of the *PVL* has not been solved yet. The latter recounts in 1015 that "after Gleb had been slain, his body was thrown upon the shore between two tree-trunks, but afterward they took him and carried him away, to bury him beside his brother Boris beside· the Church of St. Basil."[173] However, the *Narrative* gives some extra information:

> And though the saintly one lay there a long time, he remained entirely unharmed, for He left him not in oblivion and neglect but gave signs: now a pillar of fire was seen, now burning candles. Moreover, merchants passing by on the way would hear the singing of angels; and others, hunters and shepherds, also saw and heard these things.[174]

Similarly, the *Lection* relates the following:

> The Christ-loving prince ordered that the body of the holy Gleb be sought. Though they searched long and hard, no one could find it. Then one year later hunters came upon the saint's body lying unharmed, for neither beasts nor birds had touched it. They went to the town and informed the town's senior official. Together with servants, he went [to the place] and saw how the saint's [body] glowed like lightning, and the official was awestruck. He ordered his servants to guard the holy body in that place, while notification was sent to the Christ-loving Jaroslav.[175]

Here the detail according to which the saint's body was "glowing like lightning" is very interesting, something that reminds us of the fiery revenants. Once the corpse had been located, it was brought to the Vyshgorod church of St. Basil, where it was interred beside the body of Boris. However, the strange phenomena did not cease, for

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170 Maggioni, *Iacopo da Varazze. Legenda aurea*.

171 For the English translation, see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 198.

172 Abramovich, *Zhitiya svyatykh muchenikov Borisa i Gleba i sluzhby im*.

173 Hazzard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 129.

174 Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, 193.

175 Lenhoff, *The Martyred Princes Boris and Gleb*, 127n14.

candles and fiery pillars were observed over the princes' grave. However, even stranger things happened: flames burst from the grave, burning the feet of a Varangian soldier who had inadvertently stepped on the holy site. A few days after the Varangian was burned, reports the author of the *Narrative*, the Church of St. Basil was destroyed by a dreadful fire:

> Once Varangians came close to the place where the saints lay buried beneath the ground. And as one of them passed by, at that instant fire issued from the grave and set his legs afire. Leaping up he began to exclaim, showing his burned and scorched legs to his retinue. And thenceforth they dared not approach closely, but bowed down in fear. A few days after this the Church of Saint Vasilij, near which the saints lay, caught fire. People flocked to the sight and, as the church was burning from the top down, they carried out all the icons and chalices, and nothing was consumed save the church itself.[176]

The reaction by half-brother Prince Yaroslav and the Orthodox clergy in response to this strange phenomenon is revealing, for a kind of exorcism was performed, in which crosses were carried to the place where the church had burned down and a mass on the grave was celebrated.[177] As a consequence, a new stone temple was built, and the incorrupt bodies of the saints were placed in a sepulchre above the ground, on the right side. These precautions do not seem to be by chance. On the contrary, they would respond to a rite of exorcism and purification, with the aim of ensuring the eternal rest that the martyred saints apparently could not find.

As Gail Lenhoff[178] reminds us, Boris and Gleb's fiery miracles have many parallels not only in medieval East Slavic literature but also in other Slavic literatures, with the burning luminaries that appear on the grave of the Bohemian saint princess Ludmila, grandmother of Prince Wenceslas,[179] as well as in medieval Scandinavian literature, with the lights that surrounded the corpse of the Norwegian saint King Óláfr Haraldsson, which can be found in the *Heimskringla Saga*, chapter 238. Olaf II of Norway, known as "the Saint," is in fact the patron saint of Norway. He helped strengthen the Christianization of his country that had been started by King Olaf I Tryggvasson. Olaf II ruled between 1015 and 1028, coinciding with the rule of Prince Yaroslav in Kiev. Not only were they contemporaries but they got to know each other and they established family ties. When the Danish king Cnut the Great invaded Norway in 1028, King Óláfr went into exile in the Kievan Rus' and stayed in prince Yaroslav's court. In 1030, he returned to his kingdom with an army, in an attempt to retake it, but failed in the battle of Stiklestad, where he was killed. It was right after his death that his posthumous miracles started, including the luminaries described in the *Heimskringla Saga*:

> 238. Þorgils Hálmuson and his son Grímr had King Óláfr's body in their keeping, and were very anxious about how they could manage to take care that the king's enemies

176 Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, 209.

177 Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes*, 209.

178 Lenhoff, *The Martyred Princes Boris and Gleb,* 39–40.

179 Jakobson, "Russkie otgoloski drevnecheshskikh pamyatnikov o Lyudmile," 47.

> were not able to get hold of it to mistreat the body, since they heard the farmers' talk of it being the best thing to do, if the king's body was found, to burn it or convey it out to sea and sink it down. The father and son had seen during the night as if it were a candle flame burning above where King Óláfr's body was among the slain, and similarly afterwards, when they had hidden the body, then they always saw at night a light from the direction where the king rested. They were afraid that the king's enemies would search for the body there where it was if they saw these signs.[180]

Previously, in chapter 236 it was recounted how the father and his son

> took up King Óláfr's body and carried it away to where there was a kind of small, empty cottage on one side of the farmstead, taking [395] a light with them and water, then took the clothes off the body and washed the body and wiped it then with linen cloths, laid it down there in the building and covered it with pieces of wood so that no one could see it, even if people came into the building.[181]

Therefore, though neither the place nor the circumstances of King Óláfr's death coincide with those of Prince Gleb, they share both the lights and the pieces of wood, or the tree trunks, to hide the corpse. However, King Óláfr's story is more explicit regarding the fact that the body was hidden to prevent it from being burned and sunk in the sea, that is, to prevent the celebration of a typical Scandinavian pre-Christian funerary ritual with his remains. As a consequence, in our opinion, the probable cause of the fire miracles would be the sudden change in the burial rites that took place both in the Kievan Rus' and in Norway after the Christianization of the countries with the baptism of their respective ruling princes. This sudden change in customs may have caused them a real trauma that, according to the aforementioned sources, could have triggered all the famous stories of vampires and the restless dead. Not by chance the martyred saints Boris and Gleb would be, from the Slavic pre-Christian mentality, the perfect candidates to become "restless dead," being the victims of a murder, and specifically of a fratricide, and not having completed their life cycle. As we have already seen, in most of the stories of the restless dead the only way to restore the natural order is to resort to the primitive funerary rite, cremation, and fire was precisely the phenomenon provoked by the remains of the princes.

For ancient peoples, the importance of celebrating the appropriate funerary rites to guarantee the passing of the souls of the deceased is a well-known fact. We have a medieval example in the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* (*Small Index of Superstitions and Paganism*). It is the index of a longer work, preserved in the Vatican Library, which has unfortunately been lost. It dates back to the eighth century and most probably came from Saxony (in modern Germany) at a time when the forced Christianization of the area was being carried out under the rule of Charlemagne. The first two entries of the Index refer specifically to the funerary rituals and the eventual pagan deviations that could be introduced in them. Specifically, the first entry bears the title *De sacrilegio ad sepulchra mortuorum* (On the sacrileges that can be committed on the burial of the

180 Finlay and Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*, 265.

181 Finlay and Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*, 264.

dead).[182] This gives us an idea of how important the funerary problems were for certain types of deceased, particularly those who were perceived as problematic during their lives or that experienced problems at the time of their death.

An appropriate burial was something that all of the dead needed, even those who had been criminals during their lives. As we have already seen in the Slavic realm, the lack of a suitable funerary rite could mean that the deceased could become one of the restless dead. Other European examples exist where the dead provide signs or give direct requests so that their remains receive the proper rites. Similar testimonies have existed since ancient times, such as the classical story of the haunted house in Athens described by Pliny the Younger (*Epist.* VII.27).[183] But there are examples also in Homer's *Iliad*: the appearance of Patroclus to his beloved comrade Achilles in order to remind him that he needed to be buried (*Iliad* 23.69–71), and King Priam's petition to Achilles claiming the body of his son Hector to give him the appropriate funeral (*Iliad* 24.696–704), which included cremation, as per the Slavic funerary rite. In late ancient or early medieval times, Constantius of Lyon recounts in his *Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre*,[184] written around 478, how St. Germanus had rid an abandoned house of "evil shadows" that were haunting it, being the souls of two dead criminals whose remains were lying unburied.[185]

Also sins "against nature" could have as a consequence the return of the dead from the afterlife to interview the living. The Benedictine monk Guibert of Nogent (c. 1055–1124) tells in his *De vita sua* (*Autobiography*) (1.24)[186] an anecdote referring to a nun who had fallen into some "foul sins," most likely carnal sins with the same sex, that she refused to confess. After her death, she appeared to one of the sisters who was sleeping in the cell where she had died. In the vision, she was on fire and was being beaten by two wicked spirits with two hammers, and the sparks fell into the eye of the sleeping nun, who woke up with a burning pain in her eye.[187]

Cases of aggressive living dead have been recorded when they received anomalous burials, such as in the *Story of Egil One-Hand and Asmund Berserkers-Slayer*, as conveyed by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* (5.11.3).[188] The text says that after a prince called Aswid died of an illness and was buried together with his horse and his dog in a mound, his friend and comrade Asmund, bound by his oath of eternal friendship, was also buried alive with him. This transgression of the funerary ritual would have caused the dead Aswid to become an extremely aggressive living dead, coming to life one night

182 Pertz, *Helmoldi Presbyteri*, 19.

183 For the English translation, see: Lewis, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, 244–47.

184 Levison, "Vita Germani episcopi Autissiodorensis auctore Constantio," 225–83.

185 Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 29, 181.

186 Labande, *Guibert de Nogent. Autobiographie*.

187 For the English translation, see Bland, *The Autobiography of Nogent,* 96–97.

188 Lluch, "Saxo Gramático, traductor," 1–27.

and biting his former friend's ear after having eaten his horse and his dog. Finally, Asmund cut off Aswid's head and impaled him with a stake.[189]

As we can see, in almost all of the testimonies regarding the living dead, three remedies are more frequently used to counter them: beheading, transfixing them with a stake or burning them, the latter being the repetition of the common funerary ritual of pre-Christian times.

Transfixing the dead with stakes was still a widespread custom in Central Europe during the ninth century when babies and women died during childbirth. These deaths were considered to break the natural vital cycle. This was attested by Bishop Burchard of Worms (*Decretum* 19.5.179),[190] who condemned the Germanic custom of impaling unbaptized infants to the ground.[191] Moreover, it can still be found in Russia during the sixteenth century in the following testimony contained in Maxim the Greek's epistle,[192] this time regarding those who have drowned or have been murdered: "the bodies of those who have drowned or have been murdered, unworthy to be buried, after being thrown away in the fields, are transfixed with a stake."[193]

Finally, there is the famous story recounted by the twelfth-century historian William of Newburgh (*Historia Rerum Anglicarum* 5.24.4–7),[194] according to which a man "of evil conduct" escaped from the province of York and married a woman in the vicinity of Anantis,[195] dying shortly after he discovered his wife in the act of flagrant adultery with a young man, and becoming an aggressive restless dead. After having killed many people with his "pestiferous breath," two young brothers who had lost their father due to the pestilence decided to unbury the corpse and to burn it in a funerary pyre. When they found the body, they pierced it with a sword and a lot of blood flowed from the corpse. Before burning it in the pyre, they took out its heart.[196] This case is very similar to the events told by Jan Neplach with regard to the shepherd of Blov and the woman of Levin in fourteenth-century Bohemia:[197] all the corpses are full of blood and are burned. In the case of the man from Yorkshire, he became a restless dead because of his former criminal conduct or even because of the duties that he had left undone, such as punishing his adulteress wife.

Bearing in mind the above, several conclusions can be inferred on the origin of the living dead in the Slavic tradition. First, the aggressive living dead do not belong to the oldest Slavic pre-Christian stratum, but are most likely a phenomenon affecting

189 Elton, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, 200–202.

190 Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 140, cols. 537–40.

191 Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 108.

192 See The Liiving Dead among the East Slavs.

193 Zelenin, *Ocherki russkoi mifologii,* 93.

194 Howlett, "The Fifth Book of the 'Historia Rerum Anglicarum' of William of Newburgh," 481–82.

195 Alnwick.

196 For the English translation, see Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, IV, II.

197 See Living Dead among the West Slavs; Gordon, "Dealing with the Undead in the Later Middle Ages," 109.

all the Indo-European cultures, and whose origin would be the collective trauma that resulted from the change of the funerary ritual from traditional cremation to the Christian inhumation. Second, when the living dead appear they are not necessarily aggressive: their mission is mostly to send a warning regarding the abandoned funerary ritual, which was considered highly relevant. It is true that there are many testimonies about the aggressive living dead. However, as stated by Spatacean[198] on the basis of an analysis of this very same phenomenon in the *Sagas of the Icelanders*, the aggressiveness has much to do with the social background of the deceased. The living dead that belonged to the higher classes were perceived with respect rather than feared. On the contrary, the living dead from low socio-economic backgrounds kept their status after their deaths. The author concludes that just as the community of the living is organized in classes, so is that of the dead.[199]

198 Spatacean, *Women in the Viking Age: Death, Life and After Death and Burial Customs*.

199 Spatacean, *Women in the Viking Age: Death, Life and After Death and Burial Customs*, 45.

CONCLUSIONS

AS A CONCLUSION, we can say that the comparison of historical sources dealing with the rituals and festivals of the Slavic pre-Christian religion allow us to identify common elements in all the Slavic peoples (East, West and South Slavs), as well as in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultures. Moreover, fertility and funerary rites played a crucial role in the society and mentality of the Slavic peoples. Perhaps that is why many testimonies on rituals and festivals performed in all the Slavic areas have come down to us.

One of the most detailed descriptions on the rites of the Slavic peoples can be found in the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus' twelfth-century history of the Danes. It reveals the agrarian fertility rites in honour of the idol of the deity Sventovit, which took place every year in the sanctuary of Arkona on the island of Rügen, on the Baltic shore of modern Germany, at that time settled by West Slavs. All the islanders took part in these rites, which thus took the form of an element which bound the community together and provided them with an identity, as did the sanctuary.

Saxo Grammaticus also tells us how military divining rites were carried out before the battles, using for this a white horse dedicated to the god Sventovit, which was made to pass over lances fixed in the ground. This is similar to the oracles involving the horse of the god Svarozhits among the Luticians, or with the black horse of the god Triglav in the city of Szczecin, as attested by Thietmar of Merseburg and Helmold of Bosau, respectively.

With respect to the cult of the dead, we can say that the funeral rites which were most common among all the Slavic peoples were cremation. The treatment of the ashes varied: in some Slavic tribes they were buried in a funerary mount, while in others they were deposited in an urn. Cremation tended to be associated with a funeral banquet, which was called *tryzna* by the East Slavs. Similarly, there are mentions of the ritual sacrifice of widows in all Slavic peoples. At times this involved self-immolation or hanging, while at other times they limited themselves to self-harm.

Among the East and South Slavs, two annual festivals dedicated to the cult of the dead are well documented, although they actually have marked features of agrarian fertility rites. Both took place in the spring. The *Radunitsa* coincided with the Christian Holy Week and was dedicated to the spirits of the dead called *navii*, who it was believed returned to the world of the living attracted by the heat of the bonfires lit to call them. They were offered food and drink, as well as what was called the "bathing of the dead."

Then there were the Rusalias, also called the Week of the Rusalias or *Semik*. This was celebrated in Pentecost and was dedicated to the *rusalki*, a late name of the minor deities of the waters, which in the sermons of the thirteenth century were called *bereginy* or *vily*. They were girls who had died young, or by a violent death without having completed

their life cycle, and thus became "unclean dead." To prevent them from becoming harmful to humans or for the fertility of the soil, they were given offerings which included the sacrifice of cocks and hens.

As we can see, the Slavs, like other ancient peoples, established a connection between the cult of the dead and the cult of the fertility of earth, believing that there was a close link between the deceased and the place where their remains were placed. As an example of this, the same East Slavic god Veles (variant Volos) was both the god of cattle (of wealth) and of the dead.[1] Therefore, the festivals to honour the dead also had an important agrarian function, and the supernatural beings that were worshipped in them (*navii, rusalki*) had an ambivalent character, for they could be either beneficial or harmful depending on the rituals that were performed. In this case, just as in any other aspect of Slavic pre-Christian religion, the rites were essential for safeguarding the natural order and for ensuring a good harvest and the good health of domestic animals that were basic for the survival of the community.

1 See Funerary Banquet.

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